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Peril Range

By A. Corcoran and Myrtle Foster

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By Charles B. Parmer

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By R. Exon Butchart

Death at Sky Lodge

By Madeleine Sharps Buchanan

May 1934

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Five-Novels Monthly

F. A. McCHESNEY, Editor

VOLUME XXVI

MAY, 1934

NUMBER 2

— C O N T E N T S —

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Treachery hung over Vermillion Bluffs, but Jane Morgan carried on, eager to come through, depending on a stranger, a cowboy she dared to trust
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- The Forbidden Shrine**.....Victor Rousseau 37
Baffling, terrifying currents ran beneath the life of Jodhpur, currents that bore men and women alike into a maelstrom of Oriental peril and intrigue
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Pearling in Hell's Bay might have been peaceful—but for Frank Craig and Helen it was as turbulent and uncertain a venture as two people ever undertook
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- Death at Sky Lodge**.....Madeleine Sharps Buchanan 123
They were all friends, gay comrades, at the Lodge—then came heartbreaking and inescapable shadow—the shadow of murder. It walked between friends, between lovers, insistent, demanding solution

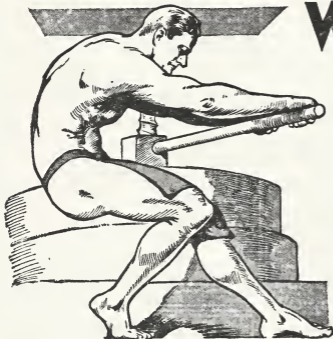
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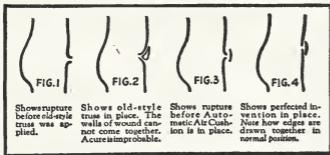


FIG. 1 Shows rupture before old-style truss was applied.

FIG. 2 Shows old-style truss in place. The walls of wound cannot come together. A cure is improbable.

FIG. 3 Shows rupture before Automatic Air Cushion is in place.

FIG. 4 Shows perfected invention in place. Note how edges are drawn together in normal position.

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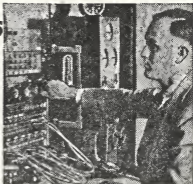
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Jane watched the landmarks. "Two minutes—just two minutes more!" she prayed. (Page 33.)

PERIL RANGE

By

A. Corcoran and Myrtle Foster

CHAPTER ONE

"HELP!"



JANE MORGAN wakened with a start. What had brought her so suddenly from sleep, her heart thumping so alarmingly? She listened, every nerve tense. She was in a world strange to her, on the isolated cow ranch that had been willed to herself and her sister by their uncle, James Morgan, and since their coming to Vermillion Bluffs, each day had brought some new doubt or foreboding. Now, in the brooding darkness of the night had come this awakening to terror.

Through the window the breeze bore the fragrance of blossoming sage, mingled with the spicy breath of cedars on the high points, but to Jane's ears came only the song of the ceaselessly flowing Colorado River, dirgelike, sinister, in that all-enveloping darkness.

After a moment she rose cautiously, not to disturb her sister, Fay. Jane went to the window, but the somberness of the world outside intensified her apprehension. Desire swept her to be back in the security of the small town where she had grown

up—scores of human beings near, friends within call.

Her gaze, straining through the shadows of the yard below, became fixed, her breath caught sharply. A narrow shaft of light suddenly pierced the darkness. Jane leaned forward. That bright beam could only come from the room beneath this one, where the two girls slept, the unoccupied room that had belonged to Uncle Jim. Who could be in there, and what was he after?

The cook, Mrs. Pitts, and her husband slept in the ell off the kitchen. Nothing would take either of them into any other part of the house in the dead of night. No one else was living under the roof, nor were there any cowboys on the ranch. Whoever was in that downstairs room must have come from outside, and rarely did any strangers pass through that isolated country. The intruder could be no ordinary burglar. What could have taken him to James Morgan's room? There was nothing of value there to steal.

As Jane watched, almost breathless, the shaft of light vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. Then her ear caught a tiny, squeaking sound. The door into the living room! She ran softly to the top of the

stairs, peered downward. There was no further sound, but the air stirred, a breeze came up the open stair-well, ruffling her hair. Then it was gone, and she knew the front door had been opened and closed.

Turning back to the bedroom, she hurried to the window overlooking the road. The shadows were too dense to discover any moving figure, but after a moment she heard something like the crunching of gravel under bootsoles, and later the thudding of a horse's hoofs. Which way that horse was going, she could not tell, for the rush of the nearby river blotted out the sound.

Jane could not guess the identity of the mysterious prowler, nor what could have been the object of his visit. As soon as daylight came she would go downstairs and see if he had left any traces of his presence. She dressed quietly, still careful not to arouse Fay, whom, through the long years of their orphanage, she had always protected.

Sitting by the window she waited impatiently for the blackness to yield to a gray light. Then suddenly, along the boldly etched silhouettes of the mountain peaks, ran a thread of rose color. The grayness blended through lavender to pink, then yielded to gold, as the sun climbed over the rim of the world. The thread of rose deepened and spread downward, until the rocky walls of the great river were shaded from vivid red to rich maroon. The fears that had whispered insidiously from the shadows were driven away. With the new day came renewed courage.

Jane's head came up. A steady light burned in her brown eyes. Whatever the problems connected with the heritage of Vermillion Bluffs Ranch, whatever mystery lurked in that lonely place, Jane was resolved not to be daunted. But she knew that it would take all her new-born confidence to face the problems of the day and combat the fears lurking in the background.

"I won't give up!" she told herself. "Uncle Jim trusted me enough to give me the responsibility of running things, and I must carry on. I'll find a way to work

things out. And I'm going to tell Boyd Hess, once and for all, that I won't sell the ranch."

Thought of Hess brought troubled lines between her brows. Hess was their nearest neighbor, located in a second little valley five miles up the river canyon. He had come to the ranch immediately after the girl's arrival, to tell them of his friendship for their uncle, and to assure them of his wish to aid them in any way possible. He was a rather important person in that section of rangeland, having varied interests and owning several ranches. Jane had appreciated his kindness, and discussed her problems with him, until a new element in his manner toward her destroyed the ease of her friendliness. She did not want his personal interest, and the mere suggestion that he was looking upon her with particular favor brought a recoil.

As she entered her uncle's room, she wondered if she should tell Hess about the mysterious visitant of the night. There were numerous signs betraying that a search had been made. The drawers of the bureau were only partly closed, their contents stirred about. The lid of the old-fashioned desk was open. In the pigeon-holes were a jumble of bills of sale for cattle and horses, a few memorandum slips, and several old letters of no consequence. She discovered no clue to what the intruder wanted, nor to his identity. The room seemed permeated with suggestions of menace. But as she went on to the kitchen, Jane decided that she would not yet mention what had occurred.

MRS. PITTS was removing a pan of biscuits from the oven. Her round, motherly face was flushed from the heat, her iron-gray hair combed back so tightly that it seemed to pucker her forehead.

Jane smiled, and the entire kitchen brightened. Even Mrs. Pitts' expression was less lugubrious.

"Good morning, Miss Jane," she said. "I hope you're feeling lively. This is surely a world of sorrow and trouble, and you've got plenty. There's so much to be done, with the branding and everything,

that Ed says he'll just have to quit if you can't get him some help."

"I'll get some cowboys—somehow," the girl said cheerfully. "And I'm not going to sell—at any price."

"I'm glad of that." The gloom went from the woman's voice. "Your uncle didn't want you girls to do that. I've not forgotten what he said the day he passed away."

"That we shouldn't sell the ranch without talking to Pete?" Jane asked. "Mr. Hess says that didn't mean a thing—that Uncle Jim was delirious, had no idea what he was saying."

Mrs. Pitts shook her head. "That ain't so. Mr. Morgan was light-headed by spells but his mind was clear as a bell just fore he passed away—only he could hardly talk. He grabbed hold of my apron when I was giving him them stimulating drops, and says very forcible, 'Tell Jane not to sell the ranch without talking to Pete. He knows.' After that he mumbled some more, only I couldn't get enough to make sense. Words like 'rocks' and 'on top,' and 'blue letter.' Then he talked about some man in Denver, a funny name like Silver—only it wasn't that."

Jane had heard the story many times. "I guess he just hated to have us sell the old place," she said, doubtfully. "Of course, if Pete hadn't quit working here, I'd have questioned him."

"He wasn't much of a worker," Mrs. Pitts sniffed. "And Mr. Morgan wouldn't have told Pete Farley anything confidential, only Pete happened to be the fellow that brought him home when he was hurt. Miss Jane, your Uncle Jim *did* mean something important. I know by the way he spoke! He was so excited."

Jane was thoughtful.

Fay appeared, late as usual.

"Hurry and eat your breakfast and we'll take a ride up on the mesa to see how the cattle are getting along," Jane said.

"I don't want to. That's all we ever do. Gosh, Jane, I thought there'd be cowboys around. Instead, we're here in this forsaken place, with only Ed Pitts working for us!" The words came tumbling petu-

lantly from the younger girl's lips; her hazel eyes were mutinous. "Aren't you going to sell the ranch to Boyd Hessa?"

"I've decided not to. We'll sell a few steers and get money to run it ourselves. You'll soon be having lots of fun." Jane ruffled the tumbled blond curls affectionately. "Come on for the ride now."

Pretty, wilful Fay shook her head. "Don't want to. Maybe Mr. Hess'll be going to Canyones today, and he'll stop here and talk about the wonderful places he's been. He's so smart; why don't you listen to him, Janie, when he gives you advice? He says you'll lose all our money trying to run the ranch yourself."

But Jane was not to be drawn into argument. She had been born on a ranch, learned to ride as a child, though memories of those days were vague. And while the wild beauty of Vermillion Bluffs enthralled her, its very loneliness sharpened her undefined fears. For days she had felt that something mysterious and sinister lay beneath the surface. Her previous night's experience was corroboration of that belief.

She rode out alone and circled around by the river. The road to Canyones paralleled the stream along the edge of the ranch, and she reined in to gaze for long minutes at the current rushing between the grassy banks of the bottomland, down over a series of foam-flecked rapids at the point where the ruby walls drew in. She watched a leafy branch that was being borne along, marking how swiftly it passed the smooth water, to toss here and there in the churning foam, then plunge on helplessly. The power of that river, racing hundreds of miles between its towering walls, through gigantic canyons, thrilled and frightened her.

"I won't let myself be afraid of anything here!" she thought defiantly, touching spur to the dappled gray horse. She loped back toward the hills, where some irresistible force seemed to draw her that morning.

NOT far from the house the trail began to wind its precarious way up the rocky wall, seeming, from the lower

level, to be a mere thread. As she ascended, Jane's eyes sparkled with delight in her surroundings, and by the time she rode out on the high mesa, all forebodings were banished from her mind. She wound aimlessly between the scattered cedar and piñon trees, turning at length into a side draw, down which a seep spring trickled a short distance and was swallowed up by the dry earth of the mesa. A bunch of cattle had recently watered there, stirring up the mud. She permitted her horse to drink from the tiny pools—some formed of cow tracks—before searching for clear water for herself. Dropping the reins, she left the gray to nibble at the close-cropped grass along the edge of the streamlet. A few yards farther up, the spring emerged from the soft bank. There she found a place where she could manage a drink.

As Jane stretched out, face down, to sip the cool water, there came a loud crackling of oak brush, and a big, white-faced bull walked out of the thicket, head lowered, neck bowed. The beast emitted low, threatening bellows as he advanced toward her.

She sprang to her feet. The bull was between her and her horse. She darted a glance about. Several yards up the gulch, atop a knoll, stood an old, half-dead cedar tree. Jane made for this, so frightened that her legs all but collapsed under her as she ran. Continuing to emit those low, deep bellows, the bull came on, apparently unhurried, but eating up the distance with alarming rapidity. Without actually running, he arrived at the tree just as Jane scrambled up the low, jutting limbs to a point just beyond his reach.

Still bellowing, the brute sidled up to hit the cedar with all the weight of his massive bulk, humping his back as he gave a tremendous heave. The tree shook from root to topmost branch. Jane all but loosed her hold. With all her power she screamed, hoping to scare the beast away.

It was useless to call for help—there was no one nearer than the ranch, miles away. Frightened as she was, she could not sit there in the tree without making some effort, and she tried to think of some cowboy yell that might scare the

bull off. But all she could do was to scream and call, hopelessly, "Help! Help!"

The more clamor she made, the more persistent the bull became. He was enjoying himself immensely, butting the trunk with terrific jolts, twisting the thick layers of bark around his great horns, crushing the lower branches of the cedar. Between times he pawed the earth with first one forefoot, then the other, sending gobs of dirt flying over his enormous back, all the while bellowing rage and defiance.

Every few minutes he ceased pawing and again attacked the tree. His bombardments were having effect, too. The cedar was loosening at the roots. Jane realized with a sickening sensation that the bull also saw that. His efforts to down the tree became more violent. She renewed her screams, calling for help until her lungs burned and she was forced to stop from sheer exhaustion.

Then—surely that was a voice—someone was singing!

"'Home, home on the range—'" came faintly through the clear air.

There really was a singer, but he was a long way off. He was riding on by, too; she could tell by the drift of his voice. Straining throat and lungs to the bursting point, she screamed frantically.

"Help! Help! Help!"

Her voice broke on a sob. "Oh, he's making so much noise himself he'll never hear me!" she thought, but she persisted in her screams till forced to pause for breath.

The voice had ceased, but she could not decide if the singer had ridden out of range, or if he had heard her. Gathering her last atom of strength, she uttered a final wild series of yells. Then she heard the heavy rumble of hoofbeats. A second later a man and horse dashed into sight over a ridge not fifty yards distant, and dashed towards her at top speed.

She shouted once more.

Jane felt weak with relief. The man rode with the grace of the cowboy, and Jane had never seen anyone more welcome. But it was ridiculous, being here in a tree, at the mercy of a bull!

CHAPTER TWO

THE READY SIX-SHOOTER

THE bull stopped crashing against the now half-leaning tree and stood with head low, body tense, ready to take on this new intruder in his private playground.

The cowboy instantly took in the situation. The riderless horse a few yards away, the bull, the girl in the small cedar. Loosening his lariat, he shook out a loop. The bull stood his ground. He'd worked up his fighting temper, and meant to exercise it. With but a glance at the tree, the cowboy dashed in close to the huge animal, turned a loop over his withers. The lower end of the rope hung in a neat hoop under the great neck, just in front of the bull's feet. The beast lunged. But the cowboy had shot his horse at a right angle when he threw the rope that now encircled the front legs of the bull, and the lariat had a fine leverage.

The bull rolled toward the ground, landing on his back. A moment the cowboy held the rope taut, then eased his horse, slacked the rope and let the bull up. The beast stood with sides heaving, nostrils puffing out. He was mad clear through, but undecided whether to charge the horse or admit defeat.

Coiling his rope, the cowboy built another loop, watching the animal closely.

"Better move on, old-timer, or next time I'll bust you wide open!"

At the sound of the man's voice, the bull appeared to reconsider.

"Do be careful!" Jane warned. "He's ugly—and so terribly strong!"

"He's just the right size," the cowboy returned, laughter in his voice. "Head-tight, here, sure loves to roll them big boys!" He indicated his mount, a trim-built, bald-faced, silky brown, weighing about a thousand pounds—every bit "all horse." The brown—head up, ears turned forward—kept his eyes on the bull.

The cowboy shot out another loop, swinging it threateningly as he went forward. "Better keep moving!" he yelled. "Here I come!" The bull "moved," and the cowboy ran him over a ridge, out of

sight, and came back just as Jane, shaky and pale, climbed down from the tree.

"Oh!" she said. "I was never so scared in my life!"

"What made you leave your horse to climb a tree?"

Jane narrated the circumstances, while Dave Hammond sized up the girl he had run onto so unexpectedly. She wasn't, he knew, used to the range. Her cheeks were prettily tanned. She was pretty, glowing with health—even radiant. A girl to draw a man's gaze, and hold it. Her brown hair had many shades, according to the slant of the sunlight. Although her eyes sparkled with excitement, they held a soft, deep look. It was her mouth he particularly noticed—beautifully shaped, the full red lips at once wistful and friendly. Yet he had a feeling that this girl could dominate most situations, if she chose. He thought she was about twenty.

Jane saw a tall, slender, black-haired, blue-eyed young man with a square jaw, a firm chin and mouth. He was dressed a little better, she noticed, than most cowboys, and, like most of them, had plenty of self-assurance. There was even a twinkle in his crinkly blue eyes as he led her horse up for her to mount.

"Which way are you riding?" he said.

"Back to the ranch. I've had about all the excitement I want for one day."

"I'm headed for the river," he announced, looking at her hopefully. "Does your ranch lie in that direction?"

"Yes. Right off the end of this mesa."

"Then let's ride that way together." The twinkle again came into his eyes, as he added, "You might run into some more cattle."

"No chance that I'll get off my horse again!" Jane declared. "You don't belong around here?"

"It's my first trip this way."

"Looking for a job?" Jane tried to make her voice sound casual, but her heart was hammering unusually hard.

"That depends," he parried. "I—might be."

"I'll give you a job," she said, with some timidity at offering work to one she felt certain was superior to the average

cowboy drifter. But she was so in need of a cowboy, and she knew that she would no longer feel the haunting terror of the place if this one would stay. Hammond delayed his answer so long, Jane feared he was thinking of a tactful way to refuse.

"All right," he said finally. "When do I start?"

She laughed from sheer relief. "Considering the importance of what you just accomplished, I guess your wages had better start from this morning."

Then she discovered that the attractive cowboy had a fascinating smile.

"Oh, that was merely our introduction—couldn't think of charging for that. But I guess I'd better complete it. My name's Dave Hammond."

"And mine," she said, "is Jane Morgan."

As they rode toward the river, she told him how she came to be boss and part owner of Vermillion Bluffs Ranch. Instinctively she felt that Dave Hammond could be trusted, and if he were going to work for her, it was better that he understand something of the situation.

He listened thoughtfully, his eyes now resting on the panorama of vermilion walls that gradually rose in front of them as they approached the river. The tremendous ramparts, with their slick, sheer face, gave a look of strength and marvelous richness to the scene. Such vitality of color Hammond was certain he had never looked upon. It was intensified by the even surface of the rock, free from the roughness of the sandstone formations he knew so well.

"There's Vermillion Bluffs Ranch," Jane said, as they came to the end of the mesa. A wave of her hand took in the small oblong valley a thousand feet beneath them.

Hammond surveyed the scene in silence. The cluster of log buildings and corrals, shaded by giant old cottonwoods; the green meadow that covered the entire floor of the canyon, from where the river emerged between two great walls a half mile above the house, to where it disappeared below, in another giant crevice.

To Hammond it was the most picturesque spot he had ever seen. Some giant artist might have painted the scene.

Without turning his eyes from the enchanting picture, he said, "I'll give you a million dollars for it."

"Sold!" said Jane, with a glad feeling in her heart because he too admired the place. "When do I get the money?" she asked gaily.

She detected a note of sadness in his voice, when he answered.

"It will have to be a dollar down and a dollar a year, I guess."

"Nothing doing! It must be all cash," Jane said.

FROM the ranch, Fay Morgan and Boyd Hess watched Hammond and Jane descending the trail. Fay's eyes sparkled with delight and curiosity as she surveyed the cowboy riding in with her sister. But on Hess's face was amazement, tinged with disapproval.

"Gosh, but you were gone a long time!" Fay exclaimed, as they drew near.

Jane hastened to explain, though briefly, and presented her companion. Dave Hammond smiled, with a friendly, "Howdy, Miss Fay," and a casual nod for Hess that masked the antagonism he felt for the man, for his keen eyes had instantly catalogued Hess's type.

Fay's eyes were round with excitement. "Oh, I wish somebody'd rescue me from something—I never have any adventures!" She pouted a little, then flashed a smile at Hammond and went over to pet the brown horse, chatting eagerly, scarcely giving the cowboy time to answer her questions.

Hess at once engaged Jane's attention. There was unusual warmth in his gray eyes as they studied her glowing face.

"I've told you it isn't safe for you to ride about alone," he remonstrated. "I waited for you to come home, hoping that you might have decided to accept my offer for the ranch. I'm on my way to Canyones now, and will arrange to have the full amount ready in cash, any day you will agree to make out the papers."

"Thanks, Mr. Hess," Jane returned

gravely. "I know you are being very kind to us, but I have decided not to sell Vermillion Bluffs. Other women have made good running cow outfits, why shouldn't I?"

His lips were compressed to a thin, straight line, the slaty eyes held quick flames. "I've tried to explain the difficulties—some of which you have already encountered. And—"

Jane interrupted. "Uncle Jim had no idea we would sell the ranch—that's why he gave me authority to run it. And I'm going ahead—even if I didn't have a chance to talk to Pete."

Hess uttered an impatient ejaculation. "My dear Miss Jane—how can you rely on an old woman's garbled account of what was spoken in delirium?" Noting the coldness of Jane's expression, he changed his tone. "We-ell, if you take it so seriously, I'll make a search for Pete Farley at once—get him back here to have a talk with you."

"Thanks." Jane turned to glance at the cowboy. "I think you'll be glad to know that Dave Hammond is going to ride for us."

"What! Don't tell me you've hired a drifter—a man you know nothing about!"

"But I do know!" Jane said crisply. "I know that he has good judgment, that he's quick to act, and cool in emergency. He's an experienced cow puncher—I am lucky to have found him."

"But—" Hess bit his lip to check a hasty speech. Now his eyes were their natural cold, slate gray, craftiness lurking beneath their surface. He laid a hand gently on her arm. "I want to protect you and your sister. Won't you believe that, and have patience with my faultfinding?" He leaned toward her, with an ingratiating smile. "Oh, Jane, I wish you would give me the right to look after you—and your interests."

She disengaged her arm, ignoring his last words.

"Of course I believe you," she asserted, in her usual friendly tone, moving toward the others.

Had she looked toward Boyd Hess just then, Jane would have been startled. His

jaws were clamped, his chin thrust out in such a manner that every hard contour of his features was accentuated, and his eyes were like ice, a single flame burning in their chill depths.

Jane realized that she must at once raise a barrier between Hess and herself. There would be no more business conferences. She hated to seem ungrateful to a friend of her uncle—one whose motives were kindly—but she instinctively shrank from his personal attentions. And already, since Dave Hammond had come riding over the ridge to her rescue, she was measuring other men by him—to their loss.

Now she went to Fay's side, and the younger girl wound an arm around her, exclaiming, "Oh, Janie, we've really got a cowboy, haven't we?"

The glances of the two men met. It was but a second's encounter, yet like the crossing of steel blades. Hammond's expression was inscrutable, a half smile lingering on his lips; but actual hostility flickered in Hess's eyes, before the hard mask again slipped into place.

The cowboy marveled at the malevolence he detected in the other man. "Must be some pretty serious reason why he's so peeved to have me come riding in here," he reflected. "There sure was no 'Welcome, Stranger!' written on his cast-iron countenance—none a-tall. He gave me the six-foot-of-earth-for-you look, all right. He'll bear watching—plenty!"

Until the older man rode from the yard, not a move, not an inflection, not an expression of his face, escaped the apparently indifferent blue eyes of Dave Hammond.

AS Boyd Hess turned away from Vermillion Bluffs, he was seething with anger. He had the peculiar complexion, almost lead color, that does not tan and rarely shows a flush. Now a dull red spot burned in each cheek.

He was not accustomed to opposition, nor to defeat in any serious undertaking. At Jim Morgan's death he had determined to acquire ownership of the Morgan ranch. When he saw Jane, he had at once made up his mind to marry her. That would prac-

tically give him two desires, as he would thus attain control of the property. Now it appeared that she was going to balk him.

Jane's rebuff only made him the more keen to possess her. He had believed that, through her ignorance of the cow business, her lack of advisers, and the general isolation of the situation, he would be able to bend her to his will easily. But she had suddenly proved difficult to manage, and with the coming of Dave Hammond, Hess sensed that a factor hard to combat had entered the game.

The need for haste was pressing. Because of certain information acquired within the previous twenty-four hours, he knew that at any moment something might break that would ruin the possible chance for purchase of the ranch, and would also probably remove any chance of winning the girl.

Boyd Hess had always played a lone hand. Outwardly, he had never broken the law, and as he took no one into his confidence, most men respected him, even though he inspired friendship in none. Yet nobody cared to oppose him on any business deal, for, somehow or other, Hess always appeared to win out. Actually he was like a person walking among quicksands: certain shaky spots he must always avoid. Once he set foot on one, he might never be able to extricate himself.

In all his experience he had never before been so determined to carry out his own will. He was in the mood to hesitate at nothing to gain his end.

It was dusk when he arrived in Canyones, and he at once went to the hotel. As he signed the register, he hesitated, staring closely at the name above his.

"Humph!" he said. "Damned lucky I came in today!"

Henry Baggs was easily tempted to talk—Hess was a good customer. But the hotel keeper had little to offer about the guest who had come in on the afternoon stage.

"He signed up, went to his room, and now he's at supper. That's all I know. Close-mouthed feller—you'd think he was beating the law." Baggs laughed heartily at his own wit.

When Hess went into the dining room, he found the stranger pleasant but uncommunicative. However, the traveler inadvertently gave him the very information Boyd Hess wished.

"Yes," he said, "this is very picturesque country. Think I'll hire a horse and ride up the river and across the desert to Thompson and take a train from there." "Not going to stay long?" Hess ventured.

"No—guess I'll be moving on day after tomorrow," was the reply. But it was enough.

After supper, Hess strolled along the short main street, dropping in several places. In each he asked the same question. Finally he found the man he sought, lounging in the Crystal Palace Pool Parlor.

"Hello, Pete," he said, summoning the lean, slow-moving fellow. "How would you like a job for tomorrow?"

"We-ell," Pete Farley drawled, "I ain't been feelin' so smart this spring. I'm kinda restin'."

Hess broke in with a few, crisp words, and the other man's manner altered.

"You only have to ride up the canyon to old Morgan's ranch and say a few words to the older girl," Hess said. "And you'll draw good pay. In fact, I think you can go on resting for a year. You might even take a little run over into Wyoming and visit those relatives of yours."

"Oh—all right. Fire ahead."

Hess explained quickly, concluding with, "That's all you have to say."

"I getcha," Pete agreed. "I'll be on the road at daylight."

It was always like that. Hess had a way of paying well for any service. In this case, he was paying a premium, for he was taking an unusual chance. To a certain extent he was putting himself in another man's power.

When he returned to the hotel, his face bore its usual expression of cold self-possession, even though he was planning a move that only desperation would have inspired.

"No other way to handle it," he declared, as he went to his room. "I've gone

so far—I'm not stopping now. Let her hire cowboys—she won't get very far. And the advantage will be all with me."

Boyd Hess loaded a forty-five, twirled the cylinder thoughtfully, then thrust the weapon into the holster on his belt.

"All set," he said softly, as he put out the light.

CHAPTER THREE

A DEAD MAN IN THE CANYON

JANE saw that Dave Hammond at once made a good impression on Ed Pitts. As Ed had lived all his life on cow ranches, she respected his opinion of cowboys. And Mrs. Pitts remarked that afternoon, "Miss Jane, that fellow's no ordinary drifter. You found a prize up on the mesa that time."

Exactly the conclusion Jane Morgan had reached. She liked Hammond's calm self-assurance, which held nothing of boastfulness. And the quick way he grasped the situation on the ranch, his grasp of the work that was to be done, made a strong appeal to her common sense. She decided to have a talk with him after supper. Instinct told her she could trust him. Then, too, as the sun vanished behind the red walls across the river, she felt she could not endure a return of darkness if she had not discussed with someone the experience of the previous night.

After supper she engaged Hammond in conversation. As this concerned the operating of the ranch, Fay lost interest and drifted away.

"You oughta be mighty comfortable and happy here," he commented.

Jane seized the opening. "It would be perfect," she told him, "only ever since we came there's seemed to be something hidden—like having something behind the door that you knew would jump out at you any minute. I can't explain it, but I've felt it all the time."

There was no laughter in the blue eyes that regarded her and Jane was encouraged to go on. Soon she had related all she knew of the night prowler. Hammond was interested. After he asked her a few

quick questions, he suggested that they visit her uncle's room.

"I know there was no money—nothing of real value there," she assured him.

"Then probably whoever the prowler was, he was looking for some paper. Maybe it was of interest only to him, or maybe it would be valuable to anyone who possessed it," he said.

At first it seemed as if their search would be fruitless. Then, as they were about to close the desk, Jane noticed a narrow strip from the top of a blue envelop, and instantly remembered Mrs. Pitts' reference to a "blue letter." The fragment had evidently been torn free when the envelop had been opened, and it bore the name, with part of a return address, D. W. Seever, —ver, Colorado.

Jane looked at it thoughtfully. "Mrs. Pitts told me Uncle Jim spoke a name like 'Silver'—maybe that's it. And he talked about a man from Denver. What do you suppose it means?"

They looked in vain for the other part of the envelop, or the letter. And nothing else aroused their interest save a thread of mixed gray and blue wool caught on the lock of the desk.

"Whoever he was," Hammond told her as they left Jim Morgan's room, "he won't come back again, I'm sure. You did right not to tell anybody about his visit. Maybe if we keep quiet, we can find out who it was and what he wanted."

It had given Jane fresh courage to talk to him of her fears, and she now confided further details of the ranch business.

"You see," she told him, "I'm really responsible for Fay's inheritance, and I must be very careful. It's been hard, deciding what to do. It took all the cash Uncle had in the bank to pay the bills, and I determined not to go into debt."

"Well," said Hammond, "prices on beef are booming. I think those steers of yours will bring as much money now as in the fall."

"That's settled then," Jane said, with decision that pleased him immensely. He felt that in matters large or small, Jane Morgan would be equally decisive, and with a clear, fair understanding.

"I have to go down to Canyon soon. While I'm there, I'll try to get a couple of riders to help gather the steers," Jane said finally.

HAMMOND smiled to himself that night when he turned down the covers on the bed and discovered crisp white sheets. It was, he thought, perfectly in keeping with the neat cabin, every foot of which spelled woman, set out by itself for his own private living quarters. A larger cabin, situated a little farther from the log dwelling was, he knew, the main bunkhouse.

It was a new experience, this woman environment. Hammond's own ranch down in New Mexico had been a strictly bachelor affair.

Flashing back through the kaleidoscopic events of the day, he could hardly believe it was real. One minute he was riding along through the high desert mesa country, with no real objective in mind, just looking for a place to make a new start. A succession of droughts had forced him to sell his own place for what he could get, in order not to lose all. The next minute he was rescuing a girl from an ornery old bull. And here he was, in the most ideal spot he could have imagined, with a new kind of boss over him. A darned interesting kind, too, he reflected. But he forced that angle of it from his mind instantly, to consider other, graver matters that he sensed lay beneath this surface Utopia. There was that incident of the mysterious visitor the night before. What could he have been after?

Hammond didn't like Jane's friend, Hess. He knew nothing about women, but any time he looked a man straight in the eye, Dave Hammond had a pretty fair idea of that individual's make-up. Hess had failed to click. Not that he connected Hess with the incident of the night before. His classification of the man hardly included thief.

"But I'm sure going to like it here, troubles and all," he thought as he lay down. "Jane's placed a lot of confidence in me, and I'll do my damndest not to disappoint her!"

Closing his eyes, he permitted his memory to conjure up the radiance of the girl, the mere mention of whose name stirred him, kindled a glow in his heart. He

thought of the shy wistfulness he had glimpsed deep down in her brown eyes, the charm of her smile, and a longing never felt before beat in his pulses. It was a miracle just to live in the same world with Jane Morgan. To serve her would yield a thrilling joy.

Relieved from the worry that had recently tormented her, Jane Morgan relaxed in restful slumber that night. Dave Hammond's presence had made a great difference. He seemed a tower of strength. And she awakened almost free from the nameless forebodings that had haunted her so long.

Fay was delighted with the prospect of a trip to Canyon the following day. And in the interest of planning new activities on the ranch, no intuition warned Jane that the events of the next week would exceed her most fearful apprehensions.

About noon a tall, thin man rode in.

"Pete Farley, as I live!" Mrs. Pitts exclaimed.

"Boyd Hess told me you was kinda anxious to see me," he told Jane, sizing her up with considerable approval, and deciding it was no wonder Hess wanted to stand in with her.

"You see," Jane said, "I don't want to sell the ranch, and Uncle Jim told Mrs. Pitts that I wasn't to sell without talking to 'Pete.' So I wanted to ask you what he meant."

"Oh-o-oh!" Farley drawled. "We-ell, I don't know what he meant, only he seemed kinda worried for fear you couldn't run the place, not being used to a cow ranch. Yet he hated to have you give it up. He said if you couldn't hang on, you'd better see Boyd Hess about it—that he'd advise you and mebbe buy the ranch. He kinda relied on Hess's judgment, I guess."

"Was that all?" Jane was disappointed.

"Absolutely all, Miss," Pete declared. "He repeated them words several times, though, as a man in pain is apt to."

Mrs. Pitts was puzzled. "Of course," she said, "your Uncle Jim mighta thought Hess would be a good man for you to consult. But somehow, I ain't satisfied, Jane. Why didn't he just tell me to have you go to Boyd Hess?"

Farley said he wasn't looking for work, he was going to drift over into Wyoming, where he had some relations. He did not linger long at the ranch.

"First time I ever knew Pete Farley to miss a chance for a night's free lodging and a couple of meals," Mrs. Pitts sniffed as he rode away after dinner. "There's something queer about this business. Mebbe he's keeping back something your uncle told him."

Jane doubted this. She had hoped much from her uncle's supposed message, and her disappointment was keen. Not so discouraging, however, as it would have been before the coming of Dave Hammond.

SOON after sunrise next morning, Hammond brought the driving team and light spring wagon to the door. It required an early start to drive the thirty miles to Canyones and have time to do any business that day. They would stay over night and return early the following morning.

"While you're in town," Hammond said as he was helping the girls into the wagon, "you might phone the railroad and order the cars at Thompson on the twentieth. If you bring back help, we'll be ready to ship the steers by then."

"I'll do that," Jane replied, with a smile that made Dave Hammond a bit dizzy.

Purposely, he did not betray his feeling. A man in his position could not make a bid for favors from a girl in Jane's place. He turned from her to banter lightly with Fay. But when they drove from the yard, he felt as if all the richness had gone from the sunlight, and the ranch lay under a shadow. For a fleeting instant he had an impulse to call after them, urge Jane to let him go along to hire the new cowboys. Afterward he wished he had done that.

The fresh team stepped along smartly. To Jane and Fay the trip was an adventure, and every foot of the road through the canyon held its thrill. On their left, the high wall ran up sheer, with scarcely a crack or break, while the river paralleled their course on the right, rarely more than

fifteen or twenty feet from the road, often less than half that distance. Close on the side of that swift water rose the other wall of the canyon.

"Gosh, it's kind of scary here!" Fay exclaimed, when they were more than half way to town.

"Is it?" Jane said absently. Pulling the team to a slower gait on a bad stretch, where a rock had fallen in the road, she imagined she heard a horse ahead of them, traveling toward Canyones, and going at a gallop. The canyon bent sharply several times along there, obstructing her view.

"Nobody's passed us," she thought, "and no side roads come in. I wonder who it could be. I didn't think anyone came this way ahead of us."

At that moment they rounded the bend. "Oh! There's a horse!" Fay exclaimed, pointing to a saddled, riderless animal between the road and the river, its reins trailing.

Both girls glanced about for the owner, but the canyon seemed empty except for themselves. A few yards farther on, Fay uttered a sharp cry, pointing ahead. Jane had already seen and was pulling in the team.

"Don't stop! Oh, Janie, go on!" Fay gasped.

At the edge of the road lay a huddled figure, and into the ruddy sand oozed a dark red stain.

"We must stop," Jane said, her voice calm, but her cheeks white. "He has been hurt—we couldn't pass him by!"

Fay held the reins, under protest, watching as Jane sprang to the ground and went to the side of that ominous-looking figure. She stooped over it, going even whiter as she got a close look at him.

The man lay almost on his face, blood coming from a bullet hole in his back, and from a wound in front. His pockets were turned inside out, and from marks in the dust, she readily understood that the body had been moved about after the man fell from his horse. Undoubtedly he was dead.

She could do nothing for him, but she hesitated. It seemed terrible to leave him there in the dirt at the roadside, stranger though he was. Something, possibly the

fineness of his features, tugged at her heart.

"Oh, Fay!" she cried. "The poor man! Somebody shot him—and robbed him. It's dreadful!"

She recovered her self-control when the younger girl began to sob in terror. "Janie! Let's drive on quick! What if the murderer is around here?"

"Oh, he's gone—far away by now," Jane said, reassuringly. "I thought I heard a horse galloping ahead of us. But we'll drive fast, so as to give the alarm in town."

So busy was she calming Fay that a rider came quite close before they saw him. Jane glanced up and recognized Boyd Hess.

"Oh, but I'm glad we met you!" she exclaimed, plunging into quick explanation of what they had found in the road, now a couple of miles behind them.

"Is that so?" Hess said, giving her a grave look. "I'm sorry you had such an experience. But you go on to town and forget about it. Report to the sheriff. He'll take care of things."

Jane nodded.

"Wh-what about the man that—that did it?" Fay said. "He must be ahead of us, on the road."

"Probably he ducked into some trail out of the canyon," Hess said easily. "I didn't see a soul, and I just rode out from Canyones." He came close to the wheel and leaned toward Jane. "It's a pretty tough country for girls to be fighting their way alone," he said significantly. "I've a good mind to ride back to Canyones with you!"

"Oh, no," Jane told him, lifting the reins. "That isn't necessary—we're quite all right. Thanks for—for everything."

Hess smiled. He stood there, staring after the girls a moment. Then he rode on.

When Boyd Hess came to the spot where lay the dead man, he dismounted, carefully blotting certain tracks in the dust. Then he remounted and went on up the river road without a backward look.

"Worked out pretty well, after all," he said to himself. "And now I've got things in my own hands!"

CHAPTER FOUR

MORE COMPLICATIONS



FTER reporting to the sheriff, the girls went to the hotel for dinner. When they were leaving the dining room, Henry Baggs halted them.

"Say!" he said. "I just heard about you finding that feller killed by the road. From the description you gave the sheriff, he's the man that stopped here the last two nights. Nice sort, but awful close-mouthed. Name of D. W. Seever. Came from Denver."

"Seever!" Jane gasped.

"Yes. Know him?"

"N-no," she replied, trying not to betray her excitement. "Who was he, really? What brought him here?"

"Dunno. He left early this morning on a livery horse, and said he probably wouldn't come back this way."

Jane scarcely knew what she said, but she lost no time in going to the office of the lawyer who had drawn up Jim Morgan's will. "We'll look up some cowboys afterward," she told Fay.

Her mind was a maelstrom of questions and conjectures. What had been the link between her uncle and the murdered man? Had the mysterious D. W. Seever been on his way to Vermillion Bluffs when he was killed?

"His death can't have anything to do with whatever business he had with Uncle Jim," she tried to assure herself. "He was shot by a robber—maybe followed from here by somebody, because he appeared to have money."

She wished Dave Hammond had come to town with them—then scolded herself inwardly. "I haven't known him but two days," she reflected, "and now I act as if I can't get along without him." But she knew it would be a relief to talk with the cowboy, whose judgment seemed so sound and whose understanding was so comforting.

Bald-headed, keen-eyed Pat Welch, the lawyer, greeted the girls kindly, but could give Jane little information.

"I never did a thing for Jim Morgan but draw up his will and fix up a land

paper or two. And he didn't talk over his business with anybody. Honestly, I believe he was more confidential with that old desert rat Shadscale than he was with anybody in town."

Fay laughed. "That's a funny name for a man—'Shadscale'!" she exclaimed. "Isn't that the name of a desert brush?"

"Sure—that little gray slatweed. And he's a funny old fellow," Welch told her. "Hangs around here, works a little sometimes, but mostly pans for gold along the river bars, or goes prospecting up in the hills. He has a shack in the hills back of your ranch somewheres. Just came back from a long trip in the LaSals, the other day, and was surprised to hear about your uncle's death and you girls being on the ranch. Said he'd be around to see you pretty soon. I must say he isn't much of a caller for young ladies."

Pausing only for a chuckle, the lawyer returned to the former subject.

"That ranch was the apple of Morgan's eye. Come to think of it, it's strange you should be cramped for money to operate. He told me, when he signed the will, that he was getting old enough to take things easier and could afford to. Then he says, 'and Jane will love Vermillion Bluffs, when the place comes to the girls. I've been to see her in Laramie a couple of times, and know her pretty well. Being easy fixed ain't going to ever turn *her* head.'"

"We-ell," Jane commented, "the ranch is valuable. It's just that we've been short of ready cash." She was on the point of mentioning Seever and the "blue letter," but on second thought, remembered that she did not wish to tell Fay of the night prowler at the ranch.

Welch himself brought up the subject of the dead man, just as they were leaving. When Jane answered his questions, she put a hesitant one herself. "You don't suppose he was coming to *our* ranch, do you?"

The lawyer gave her a penetrating look, sensing something back of the query, but shook his head.

"I talked with him yesterday. He was

quite interested in this country—told me he was going up the river and out that way. I mentioned the ranches he would pass, and—umh!" Welch stopped abruptly, pursing his lips. "I remember now, he did look sort of odd when I spoke of Jim Morgan dying recently, and a couple of nieces from Wyoming inheriting the most picturesque ranch on the river."

"Maybe he knew uncle," Jane suggested.

"Maybe so," Welch granted. "But that has no bearing on who shot him—which is not a pleasant topic to discuss with pretty girls." He smiled at Fay.

"By the way," he added, turning back to Jane, also with a smile. "If you're looking for cowboys, John Currie's son Pike is out of a job, and you could probably get Kid Nolan, too. Have an idea they're both around at the livery stable—and they're good riders."

Jane thanked him, relieved to have direct information regarding cowboys she might hire. And it was as the lawyer had thought, both young fellows were at the livery. She noticed that they seemed to have a self-assurance similar to that of Dave Hammond, but their eyes were bashful when they rested on the two girls.

"Then I can count on you?" she asked. "You'll be ready to ride out in the morning?"

"Sure!" They spoke quickly, as one man, both pairs of eyes going to Fay, who regarded them under demurely fluttering lashes.

"We'll go right along with you," Pike declared.

"We'll have your team hitched up and at the hotel whenever you say," Kid Nolan contributed.

"Why, it isn't a bit hard to get cowboys—even if our ranch is a long ways off in the wilderness," Fay said, as they walked back to the hotel. "I guess Boyd Hess'll be surprised."

"He said you had to pay top wages—and we didn't have enough money till I planned to sell the steers," Jane explained. "He said that it was hard to keep riders so far from town. Maybe these cowboys won't be contented to stay."

"Oh—I guess they will," Fay said, with a little smile, trying to see her reflection in the store window they were passing.

Jane gave her younger sister a quick glance that held a trace of anxiety, but her eyes were soft with pride and affection.

The girls were about to go to bed when Mrs. Baggs told Jane that Pat Welch wanted to see her a moment. Fay twisted her pretty features into a little grimace. "I don't see how you can stand any more business talk!" she exclaimed.

When Jane went into the parlor, the lawyer offered apology.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said, "but I'm the District Attorney, and I wanted a word or two more about Seever. They've brought the body to town. He was shot from behind, and them soft-nose forty-fives certainly do tear a man up. It was a brutal murder, and I'm not so sure now that a regular robber did it. His gold watch was on him, and the sheriff found a big wallet thrown over in the nearby willows. Baggs said it was full of papers when Seever was here—but those papers are gone. Funny for an ordinary thief to throw away the wallet and keep a bunch of papers. Now, my dear Miss Jane, I want to know what you had in mind when you asked me about Seever today. You held something back."

Jane told him at once.

Pat Welch questioned her closely, ending with the advice, "As you've talked it over with nobody but Hammond, I wouldn't mention it to anyone else. We'll try to get at the bottom of this mystery. And you might tell Hammond to drop into my office when he comes to town. Seever may have been acquainted with your uncle, but they didn't have any common business interest. A message to Denver brought the information that Seever was a noted metallurgist, interested in various mines and quite wealthy. Jim Morgan was a cowman, first, last and always."

"But—the blue letter—" Jane began.

"If you search the pockets of your Uncle Jim's clothing, I have an idea you will find it," Welch asserted. "Now run

along up and get your beauty sleep—not that you need it!" he chuckled, his keen eyes approving her. "You have a level head, Jane Morgan, and your uncle knew what he was doing when he gave you charge of Vermillion Bluffs."

Even with Pat Welch's reassuring words fresh in her ears, Jane doubted this. She felt inadequate to the situation, lonely and anxious to get home. She wanted to see Dave Hammond, to hear his low-pitched voice talking in that understanding way he had; to look into those laughing blue eyes that sometimes turned so serious when they met hers, making her tingle with confusion.

MORNING brought more confidence. The two new cowboys were as good as their word, arriving before the girls had breakfasted, with their equipment all shined up and the general appearance of young men aiming to appear at their best in feminine eyes—which eyes, Jane was amused to note, were evidently the hazel eyes of the curly-headed Fay.

They reached the ranch in time for dinner, and there was much hubbub of talk about the murder. Jane had opportunity for but a word with Hammond.

"We'll talk things over this evening," she said, and he nodded understandingly.

Mrs. Pitts was much interested that afternoon in what Jane told her of her conversation with Pat Welch, but resented the reference to the old prospector.

"Huh!" she sniffed. "Your uncle may have made camp with him when he happened to be riding way out on the range, but he never wasted no time with Shadscale Pete!"

"With Shadscale *who*?" Jane said, startled.

"Pete—that's what they call him. It's all the name the old desert rat's got."

An amazing idea had seized Jane. Her thoughts were racing, remembering her uncle's dying message to her—the lawyer's information that Jim Morgan was confidential with Shadscale, whose name was also "Pete," and the murdered man, Seever, had said he was soon coming to the ranch to see her. She said not a word

of this. She would wait, see if it meant anything—but she would tell Dave Hammond that night.

Pike and Kid Nolan went to the bunkhouse directly after supper. And Fay, unaccustomed to such early rising and long rides, was asleep before the last light of day faded from the ruddy walls of the canyon.

Jane gave Dave Hammond a detailed account of everything from the moment of finding Seever's dead body, to Welch's final words at the hotel.

"I don't agree with that lawyer," the cowboy finally said. "Looks to me as if your uncle and this Seever mighta been corresponding about some mine business. And that Shadscale fellow knows about it. Somehow I don't figure he was the one broke into the house that night—I can't dope that out yet. Well, anyhow, it looks like you oughta have a talk with Shadscale Pete. If he doesn't show up after we get these steers shipped, I'll round him up for you."

"You—you're awfully kind. And you always understand," Jane said impulsively, stars in her dark eyes as she looked up at him.

Hammond started to leave the house and go to his cabin. His hands closed hard. Answering light had sprung into his eyes as he met her gaze, and he knew he must go quickly, or he would be drawing her into his arms, pouring out the love with which his heart was all too full.

"I'm not doing a thing but earn a top hand's wages," he said lightly.

Jane followed his lead, not wanting to betray her own feelings, which were rather disturbing to a girl naturally shy about her inner emotions.

"If you keep on," she laughed, "you may earn a bonus!"


She followed him to the door, watching him as he crossed the yard in the moonlight—a tall figure, finely posed, moving with the rhythmic grace characteristic of the true cowboy, bred to life on the range.

"Oh," she thought, pressing her hands against her throat to suppress the cry that would summon him back, the cry she must not utter. "Oh, if he should take

me in his arms and hold me close—" The sentence was unfinished, even in her mind, but her lips quivered with longing for Dave Hammond's kiss. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

STAMPEDED!

 HE Morgan range lay on the high mesas that ran back from the river. A rimrock, cedarbreak country that makes for wild cattle, as Hammond soon discovered, for the Morgan cattle were about as easy to round up as native deer. But the two new riders, Pike Currie and Kid Nolan, proved to be real rough-country hands, and with Pitt and himself, Hammond had a fair enough working crew. Gradually he got the steer herd together.

The last day of the round-up, Fay was astir unusually early. In fact, she was already in the lamplighted kitchen when the cowboys appeared for breakfast.

"Oh, Dave!" she exclaimed excitedly, purposely avoiding Pike's eager gaze. "Jane and I are coming up on the mesa to help you today."

"Golly, that's great!" Pike broke in, grinning wildly. "I'll saddle a horse for you, Miss Fay."

"Thanks." She gave him a fleeting glance from eyes that tantalized. "But if you don't give me a pretty horse, I won't ride him."

"He'll give you a *safe* one," Hammond said, with good-natured firmness. "The boys are going to be much too busy to ride around the range picking you up, if you happen to get spilled."

"You're an old bear!" she pouted. "If I get spilled, I'll expect *all* of you to come pick me up!"

It was a gay outing for Fay, but to Jane the day on the mesa had a business side that took most of her attention. Dave Hammond improved the opportunity to explain many points to her as they talked over the shaping of the herd that was to be shipped. The small crew had their hands full with the wild cattle, cutting out steers and getting the herd down to even carloads of picked stuff.

Fay saw it as an amusing game and added no little to their labor, as she rode here and there, enjoying the wild racing about of the cowboys, regarding them as playmates, rather than men engaged in exacting work. It was a strange experience to see Pike not heeding her lightest glance. When Jane was giving close attention to Hammond, Fay edged off, loping her mount here and there after the lively steers.

A few minutes later she was amazed to have Pike come tearing past her with a shout, "Keep back, Fay—back!" She reined in, staring after him as he raced madly around the fleet-footed bunch she had, in her ignorance, pinched off from the herd.

When he had turned them, he again rode past her, reining in sufficiently to call, "You better keep outa the way—these cattle are plumb spooky. Flighty as they come, feather-brained as hell. They don't appreciate women—not even awfully pretty girls," he concluded with a grin, as he whirled to flash after another bunch that broke for liberty.

Fay tossed her head. "In-deed!" she said aloud. "Well—: : : at least be polite! Ordering me to keep out of the way like that! Just wait, Mister Pike Currie—you'll find I can keep out of your way—a lot!"

Nor did she pay any further attention to the eager-eyed cowpuncher, though he glanced her way anxiously, every time he had a second's chance. She stayed close to Jane, riding at her heels as they followed the great bunch of steers when they were carefully headed down the narrow trail leading to the ranch. They would be corralled there, for an early morning start on the long march to the railroad.

ALTHOUGH the flood peak of the Colorado had passed, the river still ran high, making the crossing with cattle a dangerous procedure. When the herd had been shoved into the big pole corral at sundown, Hammond remarked to the cowboys, "The river's twenty feet below the bank in front of the ranch, so we'll have to haze 'em upstream about a quarter

of a mile. The bank slopes there and the current swings toward the opposite shore. We'll start at daybreak."

Immediately after supper the cowboys disappeared in the bunkhouse, and even Fay made no protest against going to bed, after the long day in the open.

Perhaps Dave Hammond was the only one on the ranch who did not fall asleep instantly. Even though he was more than usually tired, he was haunted by anxious thoughts. He felt the burden of responsibility and knew that Jane relied implicitly upon his judgment, and his ability to handle the situation. Yet he constantly had the feeling that he was dealing with unseen forces, that something lurking in the background might disorganize all his plans. He recognized Boyd Hess as a menacing factor, yet could not figure out what Hess would be apt to do. That he did not want Jane to succeed in operating Vermillion Bluffs was clear, yet Hammond doubted if the man would risk any active move in opposition.

"I haven't a mite of use for that hombre," Hammond thought, turning in his bunk for about the hundredth time. "When he's around, I'm always imagining I smell rattlesnakes."

It was nearly midnight when Hammond sank into a heavy sleep. Shortly afterward, the stillness was shattered by a fusillade of shots, followed by the crash of breaking timbers. His startled senses brought him to his feet as the thunder of a thousand hoofs roared through the night.

Scrambling into his clothes, Hammond grabbed his forty-five and headed for the horse corral at a high run. As he passed the bunkhouse he yelled, "Come on! Come on!"

But the boys were already tumbling through the doorway. The pandemonium had aroused everyone on the ranch, and it was but a few minutes until all hands, including Jane, were in the saddle, racing after the stampeding herd, which had headed straight toward the river.

The early risen moon had passed behind the high ramparts of rock, leaving most of the valley floor veiled in shadow. Here and there were darker blotches rep-

resenting rocks or brush, or the charging bodies of terrified steers. The weirdness of the scene was accentuated by the swishing and moaning of the flood-high water. Hammond, riding in the lead, yelled, "Look out!" as his horse raised over the black, struggling mass on the ground. Jane, following close, saw the pile-up of steers as her mount dodged around them.

"They'll all be killed!" she thought in a flash of terror.

As they raced for the river, they encountered cattle running in all directions, lunging against each other, floundering before the horses and bellowing madly. Some had gone over the banks and were struggling in the current that swept them relentlessly downstream. Others were swimming desperately for the opposite shore. Hammond gave quick orders.

"Follow along the bank, Pike, and head off all of them you can. I'll go up stream. Kid, you and Ed round up the flats. We'll have to let the ones that went across the river go until daylight."

He turned hurriedly to Jane. "Better go back to the house," he said. "It's too dangerous riding for you out here in the dark. Try to get some rest. There's nothing to do now but round 'em up. What a fool I was not to set a guard!"

"But you couldn't know they would break through the corral," she tried to comfort him. "I know that you do your best—all the time."

"Thanks," he said huskily. "See you in the morning." He refrained from telling her what he had known at once: that the herd had been deliberately scared into the stampede. He was quite sure he knew who was responsible, but he wanted proof.

"Couldn't move a step against that bird without plenty of proof," he thought disgustedly. "That Hess hombre is sitting pretty, on a kind of pinnacle. But when he takes a tumble—gosh, what a long ways he's going to fall!"

The riders did not return to the ranch until breakfast was on the table. Their clothing was heavy with the fine red dust of the canyon, their faces streaked with sweat and dirt.

"Gosh, what a night!" Pike exclaimed,

as he slid into his chair and attacked a plate of steaming hot cakes.

Fay gave him merely a cool glance; her solicitude was spent on Dave Hammond, whose darkly circled eyes testified to the strain of the night he had spent.

"Wasn't it exciting?" she asked, her eyes sparkling. "It was better than a Fourth of July celebration."

But Hammond had not, as usual, a gay word for her. "Pretty costly celebration," he said drily. "Got to gather the herd all over again."

AFTER breakfast he had a serious talk with Jane. "The corral gate was opened and two panels of the fence torn down. There's not a doubt that the steers were deliberately stampeded. The noise waked me even before the cattle bolted, but I was too late to see a thing. But somebody wanted to make it hard for you to ship those steers. Have you had trouble with anyone since you came here?"

Jane shook her head. "No, and I haven't heard of uncle having any enemies."

"Well, it surely wasn't any friend that did that," the cowboy asserted, his eyes smoldering.

"Oh, dear!" Jane sighed heavily. "It's awful to think of anyone doing such a thing deliberately! I wonder if Boyd Hess was right? If a girl will never be able to run this ranch?"

"Nonsense!" Hammond said. "Hess wanted to buy Vermillion Bluffs, didn't he?"

"Oh—I don't believe he really wanted to buy it. He thought I'd have to sell, and was trying to help me—on account of his friendship with Uncle Jim."

Jane wasn't anxious to discuss Boyd Hess with Hammond, because she had begun to believe Hess's offer to buy the ranch had really been made because of his personal interest in herself. She changed the subject. "How long will it take to gather the steers again?"

"Maybe three or four days. A lot of them crossed the river, and some got back on the mesa." He seemed preoccupied. He had nothing further to say about the stampede, and soon after rode out.

The day seemed interminable to Fay and Jane. And when Boyd Hess rode down in the afternoon, Fay smiled a warm welcome, innocently helping Jane to avoid any conversation alone with him.

He appeared greatly disturbed by the accounts of the stampede. But as he talked, Jane was contrasting him with Dave Hammond. It wasn't only that Hess was some years older; he seemed like a man from a different world—one that Jane had no desire to enter with him. Her aversion for him was unaccountably increasing.

Still, something in his appearance held her unwilling gaze. He was markedly well dressed, as usual. The finely knitted jacket of gray, intermixed with dark blue, matched his gray trousers and wide-brimmed sombrero, with the heavy silver cord about the crown. But Jane decided that the color made his face appear more than ever the color of lead, and emphasized the coldness of his eyes.

"Hammond should have been watching those steers!" he said sharply.

"Why should he?" Jane said crisply. "They were in the corral—not far from the house. How could he have guessed that anyone would deliberately stampede them?"

"We-ell, that's true," Hess agreed, with apparent reluctance. "Pardon me—but I dislike to think that your interests are indifferently protected. I know how difficult it is for you to operate this ranch, and—well, you know how I feel." He smiled wryly. Then he sighed, and added, "Guess I'll be going. I just dropped in to say 'hello!' Days when I don't see you girls are pretty lonesome."

Jane's farewell was friendly, but lacked warmth. She was still puzzling over what it was about him that suggested something unpleasant to her.

Fay walked across the yard with him. "Miss Jane is very clever," he remarked, "but it really is too bad that she has full control of the ranch. It's far too much responsibility for a young girl, particularly as she controls your interest until you are twenty-one. And that will be three years more, too."

"Or until I marry," Fay laughed, with a little toss of her head.

Hess's eyes narrowed. "Oh," he said slowly, "or until you marry, eh?" He studied her in silence a moment, then he laughed. "Probably that won't be three years, Fay. Do you know that you are an unusually pretty girl?"

Fay blushed. There was a pleased, flattered light in her eyes. "Do you really think so—Mr. Hess?"

"I certainly do," he returned with emphasis, looking at her with frank admiration. "So pretty—and charming—that I could forget how many years older than you I am."

"Oh, Mr. Hess!" Fay exclaimed and laughed and bobbed him a little curtsy. "That's the nicest thing anybody's ever said to me—I'll always remember it." She was thinking how much more interesting it was to receive compliments from men like Boyd Hess than from young, clumsy cowboys. And—if she wanted to, Hess's attentions could be used to tease Pike.

While Hess continued to watch her thoughtfully, she chattered with animation, fitting from one topic to another.

"We had a grand time in town," she told him, "and Mr. Welch told us about the funniest old man, Shadscale Pete. Uncle Jim used to go camping with him, and he told Mr. Welch he's coming to see us soon. Jane says if he doesn't come, Dave Hammond is going to hunt him up."

"What in the world does she want of that old desert rat?" Hess asked, frowning.

"I don't know," Fay giggled. "I heard them say something about his knowing what Uncle Jim meant—some stupid business. It was when they were talking about a blue letter—and that poor man being murdered on the road along the river." Thought of that crime brought a shiver, and Fay veered to subjects more entertaining to herself.

Hess exerted himself to amuse her for a few minutes, then mounted and rode back to the ranch where he made his headquarters. His eyes had gone steely cold.

"Shadscale Pete!" he muttered. "I never

thought of him! 'Twasn't Farley at all. Well, Shadscale Pete isn't much of a problem—if that damned Hammond doesn't beat me to him!"

CHAPTER SIX

SHADSCALE PETE

AFTER the excitement and action of the immediately preceding days, life seemed very tame around the ranch house. Fay was eager to ride out every day with the cowboys, yielding poutingly to Jane's restriction that they must go only once in a while.

"We're in their way," Jane explained. "We don't know how to handle ourselves well enough yet, and they have to look after us."

Jane herself was restive. Since the mysterious stampeding of the herd, she was again troubled by the feeling of some sinister force lurking among the shadows of Vermillion Bluffs. Her former terrors did not return, for Hammond's presence continued to give her confidence. But she was even more anxious to locate Shadscale Pete than she had been to talk with Pete Farley.

"I believe he can tell me something," she thought, repeatedly, and asked both Ed Pitts and his wife numerous questions about the old prospector.

The second day after the stampede, when Hammond rode in to dinner, he announced, "We'll finish up down here this afternoon, and go up on the mesas tomorrow. We won't be able to start for the railroad till the next morning."

Jane was thoughtful. "Then," she asked, "it'll be about a week before you finish shipping the steers and are free?"

He nodded. "Just about."

Her next suggestion was put a bit hesitantly. "I wonder if the others couldn't manage without you this afternoon?"

Hammond gave her a sharp look. "Why, I guess they could."

"I keep thinking about that old man, Shadscale Pete," Jane told him. "He hasn't come over to see us, and it seems to me I can't wait a week to hunt him up. I thought we might try to find his cabin

—Ed Pitts has told me about where it is. I believe there is some connection between him and uncle, and that man who was killed. It's begun to worry me—I don't know why. Probably I'm foolish."

Hammond regarded her seriously. "I see. Kind of think it might be a good idea myself," he agreed.

There were a number of conjectures and conclusions that he had not yet divulged to the girl. Since the stampede, a certain suspicion had crystalized in his mind, but he was not yet ready to speak of it. Upon two points, however, he was decided. The murder of Seever had direct connection with Jim Morgan's affairs, and the person, or persons, involved in that and the night search of Morgan's room, must be capable of the most desperate acts. Shadscale Pete might cast some light on the situation.

Also, Dave Hammond had an intuitive feeling that it would be better to clear up some of the mystery, if possible, before he went away for several days, on the trip to the railroad.

"You're right," he said. "Let's go pay a call on Mr. Shadscale."

Fay had come out on the veranda where they were talking, to keep a surreptitious watch for Pike.

"Mercy!" she exclaimed. "What do you want to hunt up that old desert man for? Mrs. Pitts says he's queer and grumpy—and dirty. And Mr. Hess thought it was awfully funny you wanted to hunt him up."

"Mr. Hess!" Jane exclaimed, startled. "How did you happen to say anything to him about Shadscale?"

Hammond gave the younger girl a keen glance, as she replied vaguely, "Oh, I dunno. We were just talking and I was telling him things that happened. I guess he likes to talk with me," she ended complacently.

"We-ell," Jane said slowly. "I'd rather you wouldn't talk over my plans with him, honey. He wants to be kind to us, but we don't see things the same way, and it isn't pleasant for me to be criticized."

"I didn't tell him anything important," Fay said, indifferently.

"Let's eat—and be on our way," Hammond urged, the lightness gone from his tone. He felt unaccountably disturbed by the fact that Fay had discussed Shadscale Pete with Hess.

At the table he was preoccupied. A grave expression settled over his face. Later he had the two saddle horses at the steps with incredible dispatch.

"My goodness!" Jane exclaimed, as she appeared on the threshold, cheeks and eyes glowing, and very distracting in her riding outfit. "Who's in a hurry now?"

He laughed. "Guess I musta caught it from you," he said as they mounted.

EVEN with Ed's directions, they rode for some two hours before they located Shadscale Pete's camp. Several burros, grazing near, drew their attention to it.

The place was enveloped in silence. As they dismounted, the only sound was the scolding of a cedar bird that immediately flew away, leaving a greater sense of desertion and loneliness. Chunks of yellowish rock were piled here and there. A pick and shovel lay as if they might just have been dropped from their owner's hands, yet seemed to have been there for some time.

Unconsciously Hammond and Jane lowered their voices. They dismounted and he tied the horses, then both moved toward the cabin. Jane caught herself tiptoeing.

"The door is open," she said. "He can't be very far away. It seems deserted because the place is so terribly isolated."

Crossing the hard-packed dirt floor of the porch, she peeped into the one-room interior. Her gaze traveled from the bunk, over the handmade table and stools, and on the rusty cookstove. Her eyes widened and she exclaimed excitedly, "Oh, Dave, look!"

She ran across the room, pointing at the stove top. The fire was burned out. In a frying pan were blackened strips that might once have been bacon, and the coffee pot had evidently boiled dry. A kettle contained beans, now hard black pellets.

"Humph!" Hammond ejaculated. After glancing over the stove, they went outdoors. "You could tell this was a prospector's shack," he commented. "See those samples of yellow rock? He's probably getting a little queer, as most of those old desert rats do. This stuff looks to me like nothing but sandstone."

"Don't you think it's awfully strange, his going off and leaving his bacon and beans to burn up like that?" Jane asked.

"Yes, I do. His pack outfit's all here, and we saw his burros up the gulch as we came in." Hammond gazed thoughtfully about. He even bent to examine the ground about the cabin. "He might have fallen into the old shaft over on that knoll—I've heard of such things happening. Guess I'll stroll over and have a look."

As he walked toward the rise of ground he kept his eyes on the ground. Jane was close at his side.

"Oh, I hope he hasn't!" she cried, anxiously. "What a dreadful thing to happen to a man alone up here! He—he might never be found. And if he's fallen in, he may be dead."

More of the yellow rock was piled about the shaft, and a pole ladder lay a few feet back from the hole. Hammond leaned over and peered down in the darkness. Then he lay flat, lowering his head as far as possible. From down in the black pit came a long, sighing moan.

"Listen!" Hammond exclaimed. "He is down there, sure as shootin'! I heard him groan."

Grabbing the ladder, he lowered it into the hole. It just reached to the bottom. "It's a shallow shaft," he smiled reassuringly back at Jane as he started down. "I don't believe he's hurt so much. I'll have him up in a jiffy."

She knelt and watched him tensely. In a moment he had the inert figure in his arms, and was back up the ladder, lowering his burden to the ground. The old man's eyes were tight shut, but he mumbled to himself, continually passing a gnarled, withered hand over a slight cut on the side of his head.

"I don't believe he's hurt very bad. We'll

take him down to the cabin." Stooping, the cowboy gathered the small, dried-up figure in his arms and struck out.

AT the cabin they laid him on the bunk, bathed his head, and bandaged the wound. His mumbling ceased after a time, and he dosed off a few minutes. When he awoke, he looked at the two strange faces with a frightened expression in his faded eyes, the only live feature of his gray, whiskered face.

"Hello," Hammond said, cheerfully. "How do you feel?"

Shadscale Pete raised up on an elbow and looked around. "Damn him!" he yelled in a cracked, squeaky voice. "He pushed me in on purpose, then pulled the ladder out. I'll get him!" The papery old lips shut tightly.

"Pushed you in? *Who* did?"

The old man made as if to answer, then stopped. "No, I won't tell just yet. Want to deal with him myself, the damn, murdering scoundrel! Pretending to be my friend!"

And no amount of questioning could extract a hint of his assailant's identity.

"He came along here, when I was getting breakfast. Made a great fuss about the mine, wanted to see it. We went over and was settin' there on the edge, when he jumped up right quick, knocking me into the shaft. He might claim it was an accident—but how about his leaving me? Pulling the ladder out?"

"Must have meant to kill you, sure enough," Hammond ventured.

Realizing that they were strangers to him, Jane said, "I'm Jane Morgan, Jim's niece, and this is Dave Hammond, my foreman."

Shadscale's face brightened. "Well, well!" he said, as though trying to connect a lot of threads at once. "I been intending to get down to see you. But it's sure terrible lucky for me you folks came by. Mighty glad to know you, Miss. I heard about you ar I your sister."

Anxious to get at the business that brought her, Jane began by saying, "Just before my Uncle Jim died, he made a remark that has been puzzling me. He said I wasn't to sell the ranch until I'd talked with you. What did he mean by that?"

Shadscale studied a minute. "I dunno. Unless he meant something about the uranium deposit on the corner of the ranch that runs up on the cliff."

"Uranium!" Jane exclaimed, in amazement.

"Yep, the same's I got out here. That's the ore they make this stuff, radium, from. More valuable than gold."

Jane's pulses quickened. She was beginning to get some things clear.

"Yep, there's a dandy deposit of uranium there, all right. No one knew about it but him and me, and that Denver fellow that was coming over here to look at it. Say! He ought to be showing up any day, now. Just before Jim died, he told me he had a letter from the fellow—that he was coming here soon."

"Was his name Seever?" Jane asked.

"Yep, that's him."

"Well, he was murdered on the way out from Canyones, a couple of days ago."

The old man sat straight up. "I'll be damned!" he exclaimed, excitedly. "Who coulda done that?" Then he leaned back, panting from excitement.

"It's still a mystery," Jane said.

"See here," Hammond said gravely. "Aren't you going to tell us who shoved you into that shaft?"

The old man's eyes almost closed, but a brilliant gleam came uncannily from between the lids. He shook his head.

"I ain't sayin'—yet," he insisted. "I'm goin' to tend to him myself!"

The cowboy eyed him keenly, but did not press the point.

"He's about all in," Hammond told Jane. "I've an idea we'd better get him down to the ranch and let him rest up before we talk to him much. He'll have strength enough to stick on a burro—he's tough as the weed he's named after."

The old man raised no objections to the plan. Since hearing of Seever's murder, his manner had changed.

"I'll go," he said. "I can make it." His voice was almost inaudible, but there was an indomitable look about his lean jaws and beady eyes.

He had to be hoisted to the burro's back, but, once there, clung tightly.

"Git goin'!" he ordered. "And don't stop till we get there—I'll stick on!"

Many times on the ride back to the ranch, Jane thought the old man couldn't make it. He hunched in a heap, head sunk on his breast, eyes closed. But the gnarled hands never loosed their hold, even when he sagged sideways, and seemed about to slide to the ground.

When they could, they rode one on either side of the burro, and Hammond was continually watchful to reach out a steady hand. At such times the wrinkled eyelids would part, the eyes gleaming through the slits, and Shadscale would growl, "I'm awright."

But by the time they reached the floor of the canyon, Hammond had to support him, and the old man was unconscious when they drew in at the ranch.

"We'll put him in the bunkhouse—I'll look after him," Hammond said.

"Will he get over it?" Jane asked anxiously.

"Sure," came the prompt reply. "He's only exhausted. A few hours' rest will get him going, good as ever."

He was not quite so confident as he wanted the girl to believe. With tough old fellows like Shadscale, it was a safe bet that they would pull through, but Hammond knew that the old prospector's temperature was rising, and it might be days before he would be better, able to talk again.

"Soon's he's able I'll have a talk with him—alone," Hammond decided. "He's goin' to tell me who pushed him down that shaft. I'm thinking we've about come to the end of all these mysteries—and somebody's going to get what's coming to 'em, pretty damn quick!"

He tried to keep his thoughts from the news about the uranium deposit. If it was all that Shadscale claimed for it—well, it had been bad enough to know Jane was half owner of Vermillion Bluffs Ranch, but if she possessed valuable mineral deposits also—that reared an impossible barrier between them.

Hammond sighed deeply.

"I'll help her all I can—she won't need me long now," he told himself. "Then I'll be movin' on."

CHAPTER SEVEN

FIGHT TO THE FINISH

NEXT morning Jane eagerly awaited news from the bunkhouse.

"The old boy will be all right pretty soon," Hammond assured her as he came in to the early breakfast. "He's dropped into a sound sleep—fever's about all gone. I wouldn't wake him. Let him come out of it naturally. Mrs. Pitts can look in on him once in a while. We've got to go up on the mesa. I'll be back this afternoon."

"Oh, I can hardly wait till we can talk to him again!" Jane exclaimed. "I haven't told even Fay about the uranium, of course, but I'm so excited I can hardly keep still. Maybe you can't go to the railroad with the steers—you'll have to go to Canyones with me, to talk things over with Pat Welch."

Hammond was calm, his manner seemed even cool. "Oh, you won't need me here," he assured her. "Welch will advise you and take care of things. I don't know the first thing about mines or mining."

Jane felt unaccountably chilled. "Oh—all right," she said flatly.

Actually, Hammond was uncertain if he would leave for the railroad the following day. He was confident that whoever killed Seever had also made the attempt on Shadscale Pete's life—and might strike again. No telling how, nor where. The intention had undoubtedly been to prevent Jane from learning about the uranium deposit. When it was discovered that the old prospector had been rescued, it would also be understood that he had disclosed the secret to her. As she possessed the knowledge, there might be no further danger—but Dave Hammond was going to be sure of facts before he went very far from Vermillion Bluffs Ranch.

Jane watched him ride off with the boys up the winding trail, sadness in her heart, her dark eyes misty. "What was the matter?" she asked herself. "He didn't act natural. Sometimes, when he looks at me, I think we—we're awfully close together. But this morning he put me miles and miles away!"

When Jane went to the kitchen, Mrs. Pitts had news for her.

"Old Pete waked up," she announced, "and I gave him a big bowl of hot soup."

"I'll go right out and speak to him," Jane said.

"No—don't go yet. He's a bossy old one, and he insisted he wouldn't talk to nobody till Hammond gets back. Said he's goin' to shut his eyes and sleep some more. He's not the kind to change his mind."

Despite this warning, Jane did slip around by the bunkhouse, but Shadscale was apparently deep in slumber again.

"He's really all right, though," she comforted herself. "And I guess he'll talk with us this evening." With a quick throbbing of her heart, she knew that she wanted Hammond to be present. The conference would be an excuse for more moments spent in his presence—more confidences shared with him.

However, Jane found herself too restless to settle down to anything. She almost wished Boyd Hess would ride by, as he frequently did in the afternoon. Finally she again strolled around by the bunkhouse. Her casual glance into the building resulted in surprise. The bunk where the old man had been lying was empty.

His boots were gone, and the pile of old clothing that had been on the chair.

Jane ran back to the yard, then into the corral. The burro also had vanished.

Going close to the pole enclosure, she scrutinized the ground. The tiny tracks of the burro were readily discernible.

She followed the tracks a short distance. There could be no doubt that they went upriver. She knew only vaguely what was beyond Hess's Ranch. Above there the canyon was very rough. Why had the old man started up country? Could it be that he was wandering in his mind? She was decidedly puzzled, but came to a sudden resolution.

Five minutes after she formed her decision, Jane was saddling her horse. It required no skill to follow the trail of the burro, for there was no place to turn from the river road, save into some short, dead-end gulch.

WHEN she had gone about two miles and was approaching one of the sharp bends in the Colorado, where the canyon walls pinched in, she reined down to a walk. No telling what the road was like on the other side of that out-thrust wall. She felt almost as if she were being crowded into the river.

Just before she rounded the turn she thought she heard voices and halted. Yes, men were talking—just out of sight. They were angry. Those high, squeaky tones could belong to no one but Shadscale Pete. The other voice—it sounded like Boyd Hess, but she had never heard him speak like that.

"He could though," she reflected, recalling how sharply he had sometimes spoken when crossed or startled.

Cautiously she edged her horse nearer to the turn, hugging close against the canyon wall. The men were arguing furiously.

"You're crazy!" Hess exclaimed hotly. "I was never at your camp in my life."

"You wasn't, eh?" Pete snapped. "I s'pose you'll say you never pushed me into the shaft and left me there to die!"

Hess snarled. "You lying little rat! Who do you suppose will believe a story like that? Why should I push you down a shaft?"

"Because I knew about the uranium on Jim Morgan's ranch!" Pete shrieked. "You did it to shut my mouth, so I couldn't tell them gals. Oh, I've done a pile of figgerin' about you while I was layin' there supposed to be sleepin'."

"Well—what about it?" Hess sneered. "Nothin' much. Only I know what I'm goin' to do!"

Jane shuddered at the menace in the squeaky old voice.

"And I know what I'm going to do—*right now!*"

The next instant there was a shot.

Jane could not restrain herself. Urging the gray a step forward, she peered around the rock wall. Hess was on his horse, smoking gun in hand. The burro was plunging and squealing, blood streaming from his shoulder. Shadscale, rising in the stirrups, launched himself at the

mounted man. He lit astride the horse's neck, clawing at Hess's arms. The hand holding the forty-five was bent downward, as it sped two more bullets. They struck the rocks, scattering splinters.

The horse plunged and reared, but Shadscale clung like a leech. In vain effort to fling him off, Hess rose in the stirrups, swung sideways, jerking his body back and forth. Again the horse reared and the two men crashed to the ground, the gun exploding again, and again, as Hess tried to force his arm into a position to put a bullet through the infuriated prospector. The last shot in the weapon almost made the target, scoring Shadscale's side.

He clawed for Hess's throat with gnarled, bony fingers, as they writhed and rolled in the dust of the road.

"Don't! Don't! Stop!" Jane cried, terror choking her.

It seemed long minutes more that the bundle of twisting arms and legs struggled there. Then Hess jammed the smaller man against the wall and Shadscale lay motionless.

"Oh, you've *killed* him!" Jane cried, with no thought for herself.

Hess pushed the hair back from his eyes, to stare at her astounded.

"You here?" he panted.

HE conquered his first surprise, but Jane knew that he was enraged at her presence. His slaty eyes flamed, but they also held a crafty look that made her shudder.

A number of mysteries were fast being solved in her mind. As she stared at his dust-grimed, knitted jacket, she knew why she had been unable to take her gaze from him on his last visit to the ranch. The gray and blue of the wool exactly matched the fragment that had been caught in the lock of Jim Morgan's desk on the night of the prowler's visit to that room. Jane knew now who had the blue letter. She guessed who had killed Seever, and—but it was terrible to learn these things in the very presence of Boyd Hess. She was frantic to get away—never to see him again.

He had gone to stoop over Shadscale,

and he gave the limp body a kick as he turned away. "He's dead," was the cool announcement. "Good riddance, too—the rat!"

"Are you sure he's dead?" Jane asked breathlessly, peering down with anxious eyes. "It's dreadful!"

Hess laughed. "Why? He wasn't any good—he went berserk, completely insane."

"Oh, no, he didn't!" Jane cried, before she thought. "He *was* pushed down that shaft. Dave Hammond and I found him there. We took him to the ranch, and he was there all night."

Hess halted on the way to his horse, as if he were suddenly transfixed.

"*What?*" he rasped.

Too late Jane realized frankness had been a mistake—but not yet did she sense her personal danger.

Boyd Hess again spoke, quietly this time. "Well, you were wasting your time rescuing that kind of scum."

A sharp retort died on her lips as her eye caught a slight, imperative motion of Shadscale's hand. It was a small gesture, but it assured her that he was alive and knew what was happening. She understood that he wanted Boyd Hess to continue to believe in his death. Hess was mounting and had no further interest in the limp figure he had left in the dust.

"Well, I guess I'll go home now," Jane said, with an attempt at ease. "I only rode up to see where my patient had gone. Now I want to forget him."

"Don't be in such a hurry," Hess said smoothly. "I'm going to ride along with you."

"I'd rather go alone," Jane said.

"And I'd rather that you didn't." Still his voice was smooth.

Jane said nothing. She merely spurred the gray lightly. But Hess was at her side, leaning over to grasp the rein.

"Jane—you know what I want," he said, halting the gray and compelling her to face him. "Are you going to give it to me?"

She looked steadily into his eyes, full into yellow flames that she hated and feared.

"No," she said.

"Oh, yes you are! Why, girl, you and I can rule this country around here! There never was such a pair as we'll be—you with your beauty and spirit, and I with my brains. You shall be a queen. Come on—let's ride to Canyones now and get married tonight! Come!"

With great effort she held herself steady, but her heart pounded till it seemed it would burst.

"No, I will never marry you. Let go my reins." Even in her fright Jane could not temporize, so terribly she loathed the man. She felt secure on the fleet gray horse. She could run away from him when she freed the rein—and she knew his gun was no longer loaded.

"I know about the uranium," she said defiantly, suddenly wanting to strike at him with what she felt would hurt worst. "You'll never get the ranch, Boyd Hess. I know what you've been trying to do!"

"There's other ways to get the ranch." He thrust his face close to hers, his lips writhing into a sneer. "How about Fay?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Why, Fay wouldn't look at you—when she knows!"

"But she'll never know," Boyd Hess said.

Something terrible lurked in those slate eyes, something that brought a shriek of panic from the girl's lips. Wildly she jerked at the reins, tore them from his fingers as the gray horse, terrified at her cry, leaped sidewise.

In a frenzy of fear Jane dug in the spurs. The horse broke into a mad race along the narrow, winding way, so close, so perilously close to the foaming menace of the river. . . .

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE RIDE OF TERROR

THE gray's first dash took him well ahead of the black Hess was riding. But soon the black began to come up.

The gray was long-winded, and he was in good shape for a hard ride. But the black was powerful, and after a while Jane saw the tip of his nose at her side.

In another moment Hess would be able to reach her. But she only crouched lower over her saddlehorn, crying, "Go on! Go on!"

The gallant gray launched into a fresh burst of speed, stretching his neck, seeming to fly, belly close to the ground.

Jane watched the landmarks. "Two minutes—just two minutes more!" she prayed.

Maybe the boys would be back from the mesa—would hear the racing hoofs, and come to meet them. There was the black again, his nose at her elbow. Jane, unused to such hard riding, was dizzy. The saddle seemed to be slipping from beneath her. Now they were closer to the river. The black nose was gaining an inch, two inches. From the corner of her eye Jane could see the horse's ears.

A stretch of the road was stony, with softer ground on the side next the river, and in a strip of space slightly wider. Jane edged to that side, thinking to evade the arm she feared Hess was reaching to grasp her rein.

The gray's hoofs drummed out a hollow sound. The saddle was slipping—no, it was the earth! There came a rending noise, a rumble. The gray lost his stride, stumbled. Then a long section of the undermined bank sank into the river, carrying a great tree, Jane, and the horse.

Down, down, they fell, to the foaming water. Jane's horse went under. She was out of the saddle herself descending into dreadful black depths. Her heart pounded, her lungs seemed bursting, a mighty roaring filled her ears.

Then she felt air on her face, gulped it into her heaving lungs, before the water again washed over her. This time her fingers brushed something, caught, clung.

It was the bough of a partly submerged tree being borne along by the powerful current. With a frenzied effort, she fought up to the surface, dragged herself across the tree stem among the branches.

Jane Morgan's spirit asserted itself. She opened her eyes, took firm hold of the strongest branch she could reach, eased herself a little higher on the tree trunk.

Now she could see the big cottonwoods that drooped so low over the water. If she could only get hold of those branches—but she was midstream. That cottonwood meant she was almost at Vermillion Bluffs Ranch. Only a few minutes more, and her last hope would be gone.

The floating tree again struck a variable current, seemed to swing away from the main stream. That was better. Every second she could gain made discovery more possible. As her tree-raft slowed down, Jane shuddered to see the black horse swept past her in the swift center current she had just edged away from. A moment later she heard a shout.

Again and again she screamed. Tearing the wet scarf from about her throat, she waved it frantically with one hand, while she held on with the other. The tree swung and rolled, almost submerging her. She was caught in another cross current. She remembered the whirlpools, the rapids. In another moment she would be borne among them. Could she escape being beaten against the jagged boulders? Would her tree ride that churning turmoil and come safely to the smooth water below?

With that question came a terrific shout. She heard it above the roar of the water. "My God, it's Jane! It's Jane!"

Jane sobbed with relief.

Before the tree rocked from the tug of the first rapids, Jane had one final glimpse of Dave Hammond, astride Headlight, on the bank. He saw her!

After that, Jane had no coherent thoughts. The world was a chaos of rocks and foam, and mighty, hurrying waters. The cottonwood was tossed here, flung there, whirled wildly about, and cast down a shute, to be tossed and twisted again. Branches were torn from the trunk, chunks of the bark pounded away, but the tree rode out the boiling rapids, slid into the smooth deep water.

Jane didn't know that the tree was slowly being carried toward a submerged gravel bar and some upthrust rocks near the center of the river. All consciousness was gone, save the vision of that beloved face. . . .

CHAPTER NINE

"YOU HAVE WHAT I WANT!"

DAVE HAMMOND raced along the bank, trying to slow his pounding brain down to figure out the one sure move he'd have time to make. He must plunge into the river at exactly the right second, otherwise his horse would miss the tree. And Jane's life depended on his coolness and skill. *Jane's* life! She was out there, in the clutch of that relentless river, helpless, headed for certain death, if he could not save her.

He had to fight off these thoughts. They clouded his brain, set his body to trembling, flung a red mist about him.

Well out in the stream, water was leaping over a huge, submerged rock. Straight for this the tree was headed. Hammond prayed that the cottonwood would miss the rock—but it wasn't going to. It came on endways, turned half about, and floated sidewise against the great boulder. It struck near the middle, and hung there, teetering about precariously.

It was now or never. In the flash of a second, Hammond had his rope free, and a loop built. He shot it straight for the nearest limb. It settled over the stub. Hammond snapped it tight, sprang from his saddle. He anchored the riata to a clump of bull brush. That would steady the tree, help hold it till he got out there.

Leaping back into the saddle, he hit the horse with both spurs, heading into the river. Man and horse went under in that first plunge, but they broke the surface of the water with the animal swimming strong.

"Hang on!" Hammond yelled, above the roar of the water. "Hang on—I'm coming!"

He steered the horse to shoot by the tree as close as he dared. He was aware of the certain danger of striking submerged limbs. As they came near, he called again, in a firm, clear voice, "Jane, Jane! I'll grab you as we shoot by!"

At that she moved, and he saw that her hands were tightly grasping a limb. She was alive. Now she looked at him, extending one hand.

Another moment and he had her in his arms, dragging her into the saddle as he slid out on the other side. This was ticklish business, changing loads on a swimming horse, but Headlight was a powerful swimmer. Being headed for shore, he went on without directing until Hammond had Jane settled safely. They had just cleared the tree, were crossing a main current, when something came floating downstream, almost colliding with the horse.

Something that was less dreadful now in death than it had been alive—a toll the mighty river had justly taken.

Jane averted her eyes, shuddering. Hammond gave a second look at Hess's partly submerged body, floating with white face up, the slaty eyes wide-open and glassy.

"The last of him!" he muttered. Then he turned to Jane with a quick, "All right?"

She nodded, with a faint smile.

Hammond had been swimming beside the animal, but now he dropped back, grabbing the horse's tail with one hand, paddling with the other.

They landed on a low bar close to the shore, and Hammond waded out and up the bank, leading the horse.

Neither he nor Jane spoke. Then he reached up to help her dismount. She slid limply into his arms, and clung, her bruised, tired arms about his neck.

Presently he began to talk, soothingly.

"It's all right now. Don't try to tell me anything—lots of time to explain. We must get to the house as soon as we can."

Her sobs quieted. "It was—Hess," she murmured. "He almost killed Shadscale. I saw him. Then he—" Her voice broke.

"I know. I shouldn't have left you today—I suspected him. Mighta known he would stir up something as soon as I was out of sight."

With mention of Hess's name, Hammond began to remember many things. He eased his hold of the girl, slowly. Jane looked up into his face.

"Don't!" she begged, tightening her hold again. "Are you going to—let me go—now?" she asked, all her heart in her brown eyes.


He held that gaze, reading all that she wanted him to, and realizing that mere things, after all, don't count.

"I—I have so little to give you," he stammered, but his pounding heart was telling a different story, the story of a love greater than silver or gold or earthly possessions.


"You—have what I want," she whispered.

Then Jane knew exactly how it felt to be held close in Dave Hammond's arms, knew the fire and ecstasy of his kiss. And light brimmed over the world, the light of their love, enveloping them, creating a heaven that would always be theirs.

(The End)



**ALL OUTDOORS
CAN'T HOLD
YOU WHEN
YOUR DIGESTION
IS GOOD**



BEEMAN'S PEPSIN GUM AIDS DIGESTION

IN THE NEW TRIPLE GUARD PACK



The guard at the door was the tall Moslem in the green turban. . . . He seemed to be trying to convey some message to her, some warning. (Page 52.)

THE FORBIDDEN SHRINE

By

Victor Rousseau

CHAPTER ONE

"I TRUST JOHN STARK"



It was a thirty-six hours' journey on the Calcutta express to Jodhpur, in the native State of the same name, and, by the time she had reached it, Leila Chadwick felt like a person who has been trying to awaken from a fantastic dream.

But the fantastic setting of the Indian scene had already taken hold of her. The stifling heat, pervaded by the everlasting scent of marigolds, not a sweet scent, but pungent. The crowds at every station, scrambling for places on the train. Black men, reddish men, yellow men, dignitaries in green, purple, and crimson, and coolies wearing nothing but loin-cloths, and apparently quite at ease in these.

Men of low castes who cringed and shrank back, to avoid contaminating the pompous Brahmins who strutted toward the train. Men with caste marks in red ochre daubed on their foreheads. Veiled women carrying naked children, and boys of seven or eight years, with turbans, green pajamas, and embroidered coats, and little swords swinging at their sides, followed by obsequious *syces*.

Then Jodhpur, sprawling all over the horizon like a huge octopus, a thousand streets of single-story houses, swarming with pedestrians.

Higher up, the European cantonment on the hill. Lower down, the broad, sluggish Ganges, with its hundred temples and its bathing houses, crowded fantastically together, towers and cupolas, and—again—the swarming multitudes.

As the train stopped at the station, for the first time Leila felt helpless and bewildered, and the mission on which she had come alone began to appear in its true light, and as fantastic as the picture that she had seen spread out before her.

ATALL, handsome, dark Moslem, wearing the green turban of a pilgrim, was lounging insolently on the platform, staring at the crowd that swarmed out of the carriages. Five or six native porters were struggling for the possession of Leila's two suitcases, and shouting at her in the vernacular. Three drivers of *ekkas*, two-wheeled carts, had leaped from their seats, and appeared to be vying for the girl's conveyance. To Leila, the Moslem's intervention was like the sudden restoration of order out of chaos.

"Euro-pean Hotel," he ordered the struggling porters. "Vairy good hotel, Mem-Sahib. Nobody meet you?"

"I was expecting—" Leila began, looking helplessly about her. Where was the Hindu lawyer, Bhopra Lal, who had promised to meet her at Jodhpur station—the man whose mysterious letter had brought her from America, from her desk in the office next to the president of the Trust and Title Company, in Philadelphia, to this weird land?

"You go to Euro-pean Hotel," purred the Moslem. "Vairy good hotel for ladies. Somebody meet you there, yes, no?"

Leila looked at the man more attentively. Dark though he was, he was no darker than a southern European. His features were regular and Caucasian. An Afghan, she thought. Only an Afghan would adopt that swaggering demeanor, carrying himself as one of the lords of creation.

He was stalking beside her, while two porters carried her suitcases, and the *ekka* driver jerked at the reins of the two hill ponies. As the porters deposited Leila's baggage in the vehicle, the Afghan bent toward her and spoke quickly, softly:

"Be careful, Mem-Sahib. Many tricks in India, much men want money. See, I read it in your hand. Trust nobody, and go not into Hindu temple."

"Who are you?" the girl demanded, with a sudden feeling of affront that this stranger seemed to have guessed her business.

"You may know me as Kemal, Mem-Sahib," responded the Afghan. "My other name's too hard for you. I shall watch for you."

"I'm quite capable of watching out for myself," retorted Leila, jumping into the *ekka*.

The driver lashed the ponies, the springless vehicle jolted over cobblestones, through the bazaar, where cows and goats roamed, nibbling at the vegetable vendors' wares; then uphill, crossing an intersection where scores of natives clung like flies to the sides of a perfectly modern electric car; and into a region of shops with plate-glass windows, through which motor-cars passed in clouds of dust. Final-

ly it rolled into what seemed a European section, with smart, trim bungalows, and so to the European Hotel.

Leila had to admit that the Moslem had directed her wisely. The European looked like any middle-class American hotel, except for the construction, which resembled more that of a seaside boarding place, with a lower and an upper gallery running around it. Two white men and three white women were fanning themselves upon the porch. Not the officer or Government servant type, Leila decided; middle-class people, probably engaged in commercial occupations—at least, the men.

The women stared hard, whispered to one another. Leila guessed that the arrival of a white girl, unchaperoned, must be a legitimate matter for comment.

A porter in gorgeous livery, speaking in broken English, settled the matter of fares. Rupees and annas were all mixed up in Leila's mind. Inside, at a long desk, Leila registered, and was shown to a room on the upper floor.

Why had everybody stared at her so? Was it because she had given her name? How much did her aunt's name mean to these people, and had they recognized her as some connection of the queer old woman who had sent for her across thousands of miles of seas?

IN her plainly furnished room, that looked out upon a street swarming with half-nude natives, human ants that dodged the motor-cars and horse-vehicles, Leila unfolded the letter in her reticule. It was written in shaky characters that bore all the evidence of extreme age. How old was Hannah Chadwick? Eighty in 1930—she must be eighty-four. Leila read:

It is costing me five thousand rupees to get this letter to you out of the Temple of All the Gods, but you are the last of the family. My money should have gone to you—twelve million dollars. I have been fooled—fooled! I know now that my mission was a delusion. It was my money they wanted. I have made a will leaving you everything. You can trust Bhopra Lal. Come to me if you can, my dear, because my sands are running out fast. I want to make atonement.

Leila unfolded another note, a brief one

from the lawyer, Bhopra Lal, stating that he would meet her at Jodhpur station if she would wire him on what train she would arrive. Leila had wired, and the lawyer had not met her.

She began to think again of her aunt's life. Married unhappily, divorced at fifty, resuming her maiden name, she had followed every new cult in America until she had fallen under the influence of a visiting Yogi practitioner who drew crowds of idle women to his meetings.

Hannah Chadwick had returned to India with him, taking with her her twelve million dollars of the family fortune, deaf to all the dissuasions of her friends. Then she had disappeared from public knowledge, except for an occasional article in some occult or theosophical magazine.

She had founded the splendid Temple of All the Gods at Jodhpur, meant to be a focus for all the religions of the world. With its twin cupolas, it towered high above the sacred river Ganges. Moslem, Hindu, Christian, even the outcast, was welcome to worship at the shrine where, in her latter years, Hannah Chadwick presided as the reincarnation of one of the old Hindu goddesses.

But what went on in the holy of holies, on those sacred days when only the Initiates were admitted, nobody knew, and the Indian Government does not interfere with religious rites.

Leila went down to luncheon. Yes, her appearance occasioned a stir of interest in the room. Everyone was covertly watching her, and there was contempt upon the faces of the fat, pousy women who occupied the table near the window.

Leila had just finished her meal when a card was brought to her. It was inscribed with the name of Bhopra Lal, and Leila somehow gathered that the lawyer was waiting in the lobby. She rose and went out.

A stout, middle-aged, coal-black Hindu, attired in a black frock coat and wearing a wilted collar, was standing near the clerk's desk. He came forward with a bow and a smirk.

"Miss Chadwick, I believe?" he asked. "I am desolated that I was too late for the

train. A small child in convulsions, and I thought you would have stayed in the waiting room."

"That's all right," Leila answered, "but how did you know I was at the European?"

Bhopra Lal smiled inscrutably. "All things are known very quickly in Jodhpur," he answered.

MEANWHILE, in the summer capital of Simla, hundreds of miles away, three men were gathered in a small room with a single door, the sort of room where men may talk with the reasonable certainty that they will not be overheard.

One of them, whose identity would hardly have been suspected, since he wore a golfing suit, was India's Viceroy, holding one of the most exalted posts in the British Empire. Another had a military bearing; one might have guessed that he was accustomed to the command of soldiers. The third man might have been anybody, for he had trained himself for twenty years to give no indications of his status.

The Viceroy spoke in low tones. "They are saying it in all the bazaars, that the time has come when the star of India will glitter red again," he said.

The soldier said: "We are ready to the last cartridge and *paghri* band, sir. Those rumors recur periodically. I put no stock in them—but we are ready."

The third man spoke. "It's a case of putting fire to tinder," he said. "If the Jam of Jodhpur lets this fanaticism break loose, all Jodhpur will be a seething Gehenna in a moment. That means the Central Provinces, Agra—Delhi itself. All India will revert to chaos."

"If you are sure of that," said the second man, "I advocate the immediate occupation of Jodhpur, and the sternest measures."

"No," said the Viceroy, in a quiet, decisive voice. "People at home will blame us. England may refuse to carry on a war for the reconquest of the peninsula. What about your man, John Stark?" he asked the third of the trio. "He understands the situation?"

"He understands it, and he has never

failed us yet. But we've had no word from him since he left Delhi a month ago. He may have been trailed, assassinated—"

"He stopped that Afghan war, and he was gone three months."

"That's why I believe in him. He is the keenest mind in the Secret Service."

"I still believe," said the Viceroy, "that this fanaticism which was started by that crazy old American woman can be stopped in time."

"She was the dupe of stronger forces. It is the Jam of Jodhpur who is backing this All-India League, with the idea of making himself Emperor in the seat of the Moguls, as soon as England is driven into the sea."

"And the old Begum—the old princess? Can't Stark get in touch with her?" asked the Viceroy. "In the days of the present Jam's father, she ruled the land. She was our friend. Has the old woman forgotten that her son was murdered, and her grandson perpetually imprisoned, when her stepson seized the throne? Or that she, too, would have been killed, but that the Jam fears the Jains, and the Begum is of the Jain sect?"

"No, she has not forgotten," answered the second man, "but she is a weak old woman, and practically imprisoned in the Palace."

"If I had been Viceroy in those days, I would have put the usurper off his throne, instead of making terms with him. If John Stark can get in touch with the Begum and arouse the Jains in time—"

"Yes," said the second man, "if John Stark can capitalize the situation, as he treated those complications in Afghanistan—"

"Can you rely on him?" the Viceroy demanded of the third man. "Or does this mean a military expedition against Jodhpur, and a general native uprising?"

"I trust John Stark," the third man answered. "He has never failed us yet." He turned to the second man, the soldier. "I think military measures would be premature just now," he said, "though I would have a force ready to intervene. I don't think that John Stark will fail us. He is not a man who fails."

CHAPTER TWO

ORDERED OUT



"HY ask, Miss Chadwick?" smirked the fat, little lawyer, as the two sat in a corner of the drawing room of the Hotel European. "Everything is known in Jodhpur as soon as it has happened, especially where a Mem-Sahib traveling alone is concerned. I am desolated that my small son's convulsions detained me. But now we can talk business together."

"How soon can I see my aunt?" Leila asked.

There was a curious look on Bhopra Lal's face. "It shall be arranged as soon as possible. You must realize, Miss Chadwick, that your aunt is very holy woman—in fact, a saint. A reincarnation of one of the old goddesses of our religion, the ignorant believe. They think that she will never die, but will be changed, at the point of death, into a young and beautiful woman like yourself. Do you know that the family resemblance is very strong?"

"Yes, all we Chadwicks look more or less alike," Leila answered, turning off the fat, black man's compliment. "But when can I see her?"

"Tonight I think it can be arrange," said Bhopra Lal. "The precincts of the Temple are very holy. A white Mem-Sahib entering would attract attention. Tonight I think it can be arrange, if you remain quietly in this hotel and communicate with nobody."

"And about the business of the money?" Leila asked, in her forthright American way.

Bhopra Lal clasped his hands on his knees. "It is a lot of money, even for India," he answered. "It built the Temple, and then there were wise investments later. I do not know what your aunt is worth today, but it is a considerable sum. Naturally, the Temple does not want to see it pass out of its hands to a Mem-Sahib who will take it back to America. And so caution is needed. Two weeks ago, before Her Holiness had her stroke—"

"My aunt has had a stroke?" cried Leila. The Hindu looked apprehensively about

him. "For two weeks she has lain in a coma," he answered. "It is feared that it is the end. She recognizes no one. Fortunately, before this illness, she sent for me and made a will, leaving everything to you.

"Now, there is going to be difficulty. The priests, you understand—well, the British Government dares not interfere with the priests. But I can get the money for you—most of it. All that can be arranged after you have seen your aunt. Only I caution you to remain in hotel the rest of the day. See nobody, talk to nobody. I am your lawyer, you understand."

Leila thought for a moment. There was something unctuous about Bhopra Lal; instinctively she distrusted him. And yet her aunt had said that the man could be trusted. Helpless in this strange country, Leila felt that she must follow out the Hindu's instructions until, at any rate, she had seen the old woman, who had left her native land for India years before Leila's birth.

"I'll do what you say," answered the girl. "What time will you call for me?"

"At eight o'clock," the lawyer replied promptly. "Have now an excellent woman for convulsions, in case small child develops further attack. It is merely the teething. Do not worry about me."

"Not half so much as about myself," was Leila's thought, as Bhopra Lal rose with a bow and a flourish, and took his departure.

SHE had dined late; tea was already being served. Leila became aware that the guests had crowded into the reception room, and were still scanning her. Most of them were women, but half a dozen of them looked of a different stamp from the kind she had seen before—wives of army officers, prim English dowagers. There was also a scattering of youngish men, mostly in polo kit.

A middle-aged woman, after a glance at a friend, came over to Leila's table and sat down.

"My dear, I'm Mrs. Rowland, and my husband is the senior major at the cantonment," she said. "I know very well who you are, of course, and everybody is great-

ly interested in you. How is your dear aunt?"

"I haven't seen her yet," said Leila, "but I understand that she has not been well."

"Such a wonderful woman," said Mrs. Rowland. "The Hindus look upon her as a saint. Of course she cut herself off completely from our little English community when she adopted the rôle she did. It is impossible for us to mix socially with the Hindus. But we all admire her."

"Thank you," Leila murmured, wondering what was coming next.

"You know, this theosophical idea of a unified world religion has taken hold of a good many people," Mrs. Rowland went on. "But it is unfortunate that your dear aunt should have chosen to throw in her lot with the natives. Our power in India is built upon prestige, and the sight of a white woman mixing with Hindus on terms of equality—living with them, in short—has done immeasurable harm."

"I have never met my aunt," said Leila, "and of course I am not responsible for her actions."

"Quite so, my dear. But may I advise you, if you have come here with any idea of succeeding her in her work, to abandon the idea at once and go back to America. It won't do, my dear—it won't do. Here is my husband," she added, as a tall man in khaki uniform came into the room, and made his way toward them. Mrs. Rowland presented him, and he bowed and sat down, calling for tea to the waiter.

"I have been talking to Miss Chadwick," said Mrs. Rowland.

"Ah, yes," said Major Rowland, tapping his fingers on the tablecloth. "I wonder how you are going to like India, Miss Chadwick. Quite a courageous feat, your coming up from Calcutta unchaperoned."

"I don't think I was ever in any danger," answered Leila. Then, for no reason that she could determine, she recalled the look on the face of the tall Moslem, Kemal. He had certainly not insulted her. And yet there had been a certain possessiveness that Leila had resented, a personal dominance against which her anger had risen.

"Well, now, look here, Miss Chadwick," said Major Rowland, leaning across the

table. He waited till the waiter had deposited the tea and little cakes upon it, let his wife pour the tea. "Look here," he said, "I've—er—been commissioned by our O. C., Colonel Bradley, to speak to you about your coming here. We can't have you falling into the hands of these filthy Hindus."

"I have no intention of falling into anyone's hands," replied Leila coldly. "And, if you are referring to my aunt, she is a free woman—"

"Not by a jugful, Miss Chadwick. She has been absolutely dominated by that gang of idol-worshippers for years. She built that temple next to the palace with her own money. She has encouraged the native to think he is the equal of the white, and that sort of thing means the end of British rule in India.

"We can't have you following in your aunt's footsteps, that's the long and short of it. It was a grave error on your part not to call on the District Commissioner at Calcutta; he'd have told you a lot of things. Pardon me if I'm speaking forcibly, but there's a great deal of native unrest, and the Resident won't tolerate it."

"The Resident?"

"The political officer who is attached to the Jam of Jodhpur's staff, a sort of minister or ambassador, or what you choose to call it. He wired Colonel Bradley that it is essential you leave Jodhpur. Why, there's not a native within a hundred miles doesn't know you're Miss Chadwick's niece, nor thinks but you're planning to succeed her."

"I see," said Leila thoughtfully.

SHE sipped her tea, sat watching Major Rowland and his wife, conscious, too, that everyone in the room was watching her as if she were some wild animal.

Should she tell Major Rowland the real reason for her visit to Jodhpur? It was not Bhopra Lal's advice that deterred her, but a growing resentment against being ordered back, and against the covert sneers on the faces of the women.

"Where is the Resident?" she asked.

"He is at Simla, at present, but Colonel Bradley is acting as his deputy, and he has

positive orders to ask that you leave Jodhpur within a measurable time."

"If I refuse?"

"Come, Miss Chadwick, we are getting too unfriendly," replied the Major. "There is no question of treating you as if you were some undesirable person. It is simply unfortunate that you should happen to be Miss Hannah Chadwick's niece, and there are grave political reasons why it is undesirable that you remain. Furthermore, this is an independent native state, and the Resident has grave responsibilities for every white person who enters it.

"For a woman to visit Jodhpur, unattached—if you'll excuse the word—is something unheard of. Your very presence here, apart from your aunt, would require us to keep you under constant supervision.

"What I propose is that you be the guest of Mrs. Rowland and myself at the cantonment for three or four days. You will see something of military life, and we'll do our best to give you a good time—riding, dances, tennis, perhaps a gymkhana, and so forth."

"And then I am to go?"

"I'm afraid those are the orders."

"Do you realize," Leila burst out indignantly, "that my aunt is a very sick old woman, and that I have come a good many thousand miles to see her? Do you expect me to go away without seeing her? Or what is in your mind?"

Major Rowland looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"Suppose she doesn't want to see you?" he asked. "She has cut herself off from her own race for years."

"It happens that I am here by her invitation. She wrote to me."

"May I see the letter?"

"No, certainly not," said Leila, and the Major looked more uncomfortable than ever.

"It might be arranged through the Jam," he said hesitantly. "His influence could secure the presence of a military officer to accompany you into the Temple. I think we could do that. But please let us drive you back to our bungalow, and then we can talk things over."

Leila was thoroughly infuriated. "I am

going to refuse your invitation," she answered. "There are other white women living here, and it seems a thoroughly respectable hotel. If I place myself under anybody's protection, it will be that of the American consul."

"I see," said Major Rowland. He drained his teacup, made as if to rise. Had he been bluffing? The absence of any further threats seemed a little ominous to Leila. One thing, however, seemed sure to her: for some reason, the English authorities were determined that she should not have access to her aunt unaccompanied.

And that was exactly what Leila was resolved to do.

AT this moment a diversion occurred in the entrance of a gorgeously attired Hindu, fully six feet tall, turbaned and with a long embroidered coat that fell to the tops of his riding boots. He stopped in the middle of the room for a moment, and then made his way straight to Leila.

"Miss Chadwick," he said, "I am commissioned to invite you to the reception of Her Highness the Begum of Jodhpur tomorrow afternoon."

He saluted, and laid an enormous visiting card, inscribed in Hindu characters, upon the table; then backed, saluted, and turned away.

Leila looked in astonishment at the invitation. She didn't even know who the Begum was. Then she became aware that Major Rowland and his wife were on their feet.

"Well, Miss Chadwick, we shall hope to see you at Her Highness's reception tomorrow afternoon," said Major Rowland. "You'll find most of our fellows there, and perhaps we'll then be able to persuade you to become our guest at the cantonment after all. At any rate, it will be an interesting experience to meet the Queen Mother in all her glory. Not the Jam's mother, you know, but the first wife of his father."

So that was who the Begum was!

The Rowlands departed, and Leila, followed by more inquisitive stares than ever, went up to her room. Opening her locked suitcase, to change her frock for dinner, she found an envelope inside.

Upon the sheet of paper within were a few penciled words:

Should not have talked. On account difficulties and chance of being observed, it might be better to meet me at eight o'clock at the brassware store two blocks to the right from the hotel entrance.

Leila read the note in bewilderment. How had Bhopra Lal obtained access to her locked suitcase? How had he got into her locked room? How had he known of her conversation of a few minutes before?

She opened the door of her closet. No one was hiding there. And there was no coping outside, along which a man might have passed.

The incident only increased the girl's determination to carry out the purpose that had brought her to Jodhpur. But she began to realize that Bhopra Lal had spoken the truth when he said that everything was known in Jodhpur as soon as it happened. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

THE TEMPLE OF ALL THE GODS

AGAIN Leila thought of the tall Moslem as she slipped out of the hotel at eight o'clock that night, and of his warning to her not to enter a Hindu temple. Had this dragoman, Kemal, or whatever his occupation was, also known the purpose of her arrival at Jodhpur?

Leila was not in the least frightened by the warning. Jodhpur was weird, fantastic, but it was not in the least terrible to her, and she was an American girl, accustomed to going where she pleased and doing what she liked.

The lawyer's voice sounded in her ear outside the brassware shop before she had seen him: "Please to follow me, Miss Chadwick. In India white ladies do not walk with colored men."

Then Leila saw him, a stout figure with a malacca cane, rolling a little as he walked in front of her. There was something uncanny in Bhopra Lal's ability to appear and disappear at will.

The street was lit by arc lights strung

along high poles, and in the cool of the evening everybody seemed to be abroad, though Leila saw none but black faces. Bhopra Lal turned presently, and made his way down a steep street that evidently ran toward the river. Down over cobblestones, between rows of single-story houses, tightly shuttered, and hardly a pedestrian now in sight. Still, Leila wasn't afraid—only a little startled when the Hindu turned suddenly and, like a conjuror, produced a voluminous shawl from the pocket of his frock coat.

"It is very necessary to place this over your head and let it hang low," he explained. "Then we can go on together without attracting attention. It is not usual for a white lady to approach the temples at this hour of the night."

"Will you tell me how you got that letter into my suitcase?" Leila demanded.

She thought she heard the Hindu chuckle, but he busied himself adjusting the shawl over her little hat, carefully avoiding any physical contact with his fingers. Leila noticed that, but couldn't decide whether it was from delicacy, or from fear of caste contamination.

They were walking side by side now, and for the first time Leila began to grow a little apprehensive. The steep descent continued, apparently a roadway cut between the high bluffs that towered on either hand. There were no houses now, and the stench of decaying matter came from the patches of grass on either hand, down which ran noisome sewers toward the river.

And then of a sudden the wide, mysterious Ganges broke upon Leila's vision.

She had seen it by daytime from the train, but she had never dreamed it could be so beautiful by night. Across the river rose the dim outlines of temples; points of fire flickered from boats upon the surface; to right and left appeared huge structures, outlined with flickering lights.

"To the right, the Palace," explained Bhopra Lal, indicating an enormous structure on the top of the bluff, only two stories high, but topped by towers and cupolas, and extending away into what seemed the infinite distance.

It stood on the extreme edge of the bluff, and behind it appeared several acres of trees and cleared ground, probably gardens, since the faint but cloying odor of jasmine came from that direction on the night wind.

"To the left," said Bhopra Lal, "the Temple of All the Gods."

LEILA could see the massive structure, with its twin cupolas, and a light burning high in each. She picked her way beside the Hindu along the edge of what seemed to be a bathing pool, with a high fence and numerous wooden partitions. A hideous, pock-marked Hindu, with a smear of yellow ochre on his face, came out and gibbered at them. Bhopra Lal said something, and the man shrank away.

They were in the Temple precincts now, traversing a flagged courtyard, littered with scraps of paper and fruit peelings. Shadows moved softly to and fro through the night, but none approached them.

"Do not be afraid, Miss Chadwick," said Bhopra Lal. "We go by private entrance to Her Holiness's apartments."

"I'm not afraid," said Leila. But she knew she was, now.

And in a tall form that appeared close to her for a fleeting instant, and then vanished in the fog-wraiths that were blowing up from the Ganges, she imagined for an instant that she saw the Moslem, Kemal. Imagination, of course, but why had the brief interview with the man impressed her so profoundly?

The figure was gone. They passed into a second court, and Bhopra Lal turned to the left, as if he intended to skirt the Temple. From a small, circular, detached structure, the voice of a girl could be heard. She was singing and strumming on a lute. Other forms were moving among the thick grove of trees that surrounded the place.

They reached a side door in the main building. An aged priest, nude save for a loin-cloth, was squatting before it, mumbling and swaying. Bhopra Lal stooped and whispered to him.

The old priest rose and produced a bunch of heavy, jangling brass keys from his cloth. He inserted one of them into the

door, and turned the lock. The door swung open, and Leila and her guide passed in.

They proceeded along a corridor, dimly illuminated by hanging lamps of bronze, in which the clarified butter burned with a bluish light. In front of her Leila could see what looked like the interior of the Temple.

Priests were kneeling, swaying, intoning before drawn curtains, and all around the interior were huge statues of the Hindu gods—Vishnu, Krishna, Siva, and the hideous goddess Kali, standing on her husband's murdered corpse.

Bhopra Lal turned to the left again, however, along a lengthy corridor, and stopped before a priest on guard in front of a door. Again he whispered, and again the key slid into the lock, and the door opened.

"These are Her Holiness's apartments. You will see her in a minute or two," the Hindu whispered.

Leila clutched at her heart. She was afraid, horribly afraid at last. It was a nightmare, coming here to find Hannah Chadwick, of Boston, born to the New England tradition, dying here in this magnificence and squalor, at once a goddess and a poor, feeble old woman whose mind had found itself at the end of life.

THE room in which she found herself was richly furnished in the Indian style. Two men were standing under the large lamp that hung from the carved ceiling. One was a nervous little Hindu in a frock coat, the other was also a Hindu, about forty years of age, but wearing a garment of extraordinary magnificence. What looked like pearls and precious stones were sewn down the front of it. There was a broad sash across his shoulder, and there were ribbons upon his breast. His face was heavy, debauched, crafty, and yet virile.

Bhopra Lal sank to his knees. He spoke in Hindustani. He seemed paralyzed with fear. The Hindu turned to Leila.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Chadwick," he said. "I am the Jam of Jodhpur. I wish you could have arrived earlier. Your aunt is dead."

Leila let him clasp her hand, hardly con-

scious of his keen scrutiny of her face. She felt something like a trap closing about her, but she couldn't understand it yet.

"She was a saintly woman, and we all honored her for her work for India," pursued the ruler, still holding Leila's hand. "Permit me to take you to her."

A guard, whom Leila had not seen in the gloom of the room, raised a curtain at the end, and she went through, the Jam deferentially stepping aside to permit her to precede him. And so for the first time in her life Leila saw Miss Hannah Chadwick, the legend of her earliest days.

Upon a low dais decorated with golden filigree work lay the body of the old woman, robed in a long gown of white. Her hands were folded on her breast. Above her forehead, marked with the caste-cipher of the Brahmins, and above her snow-white hair, was a sort of tiara, scintillating with jewels.

The stern old face showed no signs of weakness or senility. Death had ironed out the wrinkles; it might have been the face of a woman in her sixties. And, as she looked at the dead woman, Leila recognized instantly the original of the portrait she had seen in the old Chadwick home in Boston.

She recognized, too, the extraordinary resemblance to herself, or, rather, the family likeness. All the Chadwicks looked very much alike, from Colonel Chadwick, aide to Washington, down to the present generation. All had the same high-bridged, slightly aquiline nose, the gray-blue eyes, the firm set of the mouth.

Leila had never seen the old woman in her life before, and yet she was poignantly overcome by the tragedy of Hannah Chadwick's life.

"She might have been yourself," the Jam was saying. "She must have looked very like you in her youth."

"Yes, I suppose so," Leila answered mechanically. "When will the funeral be?"

"The incineration, Miss Chadwick? In five days' time, on the third day of the feast of Kali, which begins the day after tomorrow."

"Cannot she—I should like her to have Christian burial," said Leila.

"Unfortunately, Miss Chadwick—most unfortunately—your aunt renounced the Christian faith when she was admitted to that of the Brahmins. I have no power in such matters, but, believe me, it would be an impossibility. To millions of our belief, including myself, your aunt stood for the incarnation of Prasnaya, the great goddess. A foolish belief, perhaps, but, believe me, your wish is impossible."

"Very well," Leila answered. What did it matter, after all? She was conscious only of a sense of futility, of the tragedy of the life that had ended in that darkened room, after its beginnings so far away.

"But you must be sure to come to the reception of my aunt, the Begum, tomorrow afternoon," the Jam continued. "It is a rare honor—she would be bitterly disappointed and offended if you were not there. There will also be many of the English officers—good fellows, all of them. It will be a pleasant experience for you."

"I shall come," Leila said. She moved closer toward the bed, stooped down, and imprinted a kiss upon the waxen forehead. "I have seen enough," she told the Prince.

"My carriage is waiting to take you back to your hotel," he answered, "so the shawl will not be necessary. Permit me." He removed the shawl from Leila's head and body, his black, perfumed fingers grazing her skin caressingly as he did so. "I shall hope to see you tomorrow," he added. "This has been one of the most enjoyable evenings in my life."

The compliment seemed strange, under the circumstances, Leila thought, as she rejoined Bhopra Lal in the next room. It was not until the Jam and his attendant had left that the Hindu rose from his knees. He was quaking, his voice shook as he spoke.

"I did not know His Highness would come here in person," he said huskily. "I did not know your aunt had died, Miss Chadwick. Believe me, I am innocent of these things, and very much troubled about small child convulsing."

"There's nothing to apologize for," Leila answered. "It was a pleasure to meet the Prince, and, as for my aunt, I'm glad she's out of her suffering, though I dread this

horrible festival, and her poor body being burned with Hindu rites."

"It is a great festival, Miss Chadwick, the biggest of the year, both for Hindus and Jains, whose temple is next to our own. It is deplorable from your point of view, but it cannot be helped. But touching on the money—your aunt made a will which is in my possession. Everything to yourself, except, of course, the Temple, which she endowed. The priests will raise rumpus, and we must go carefully. Nothing to be done until after the festival, you understand."

Leila was on the point of telling Bhopra Lal that the money counted for very little with her, but she wisely refrained. Bhopra Lal was bent on feathering his own nest—she had no doubt of that.

OUTSIDE, in the mud of the sewerage that ran down to the Ganges, an old-fashioned victoria and a pair of smart horses were waiting. A footman descended from the box beside the driver and touched his hat. Leila got in, looked for Bhopra Lal to follow her, but he drew gravely back.

"I bid you good evening, Miss Chadwick, and a thousand thanks for having been able to be at your service," said the Hindu.

Up the steep, cobbled slope, the driver lashing his horses, along the wide street to the hotel entrance. Leila got out and passed into the hotel, to be pursued by the same curious, sneering looks by the half dozen women who were seated in the lobby. She went up to her room and undressed.

Lying awake, she heard the rumble of the night traffic, and the occasional shrill *Alakh, Alakh* of a street beggar's cry. The crowded events of the day had left her bewildered. She wanted a confidant other than the smug Hindu, who, she was convinced, was playing a game for his own ends.

Alakh, Alakh sounded the wail of the street beggar again. Leila lay with wide open eyes, staring into the dark, until the wail and the rumble of the distant traffic had ceased.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE LITTLE EAGLET

AND the little eaglet—how is he today?"

"It is the Sahib!" shouted the boy, running through the forest glade toward the white man who rode slowly on a bay horse with sweat-stained flanks. "Chunder! Bose! Do you not see the Sahib has arrived?" the youth cried, glancing back over his shoulder at two tall forest Jains, who had been engaged in hurling the discus with him.

"Ah, Sahib, you and your horse move so silently that, had you been an enemy, you could have killed us three, and we would never have known that you had arrived," the boy continued, panting, as he reached the horseman's side.

John Stark reined in and dismounted, handing his horse to one of the Jain attendants. A tall, fair Englishman, perhaps between thirty and forty years of age, he looked anything but the man of mystery he was reputed to be throughout the length and breadth of India.

His features were relaxed in a pleased smile as he looked at the dusky youth, who might have been between fifteen and seventeen. He took the thin arm in his hands, flexed it, and felt the biceps.

"So the muscles are growing strong. And the discus—how far did you throw it today?"

"Sahib," said the Jain, Bose, "he threw within five feet as far as Chunder, who is a strong man. Our eaglet princeling is becoming an eagle, after three months in our forests."

"Good," smiled John Stark. He took the boy by the arm, and they strolled along a path that ran into the heart of the forest.

It was fewer than fifty miles from Jodhpur, but to the forest denizens—and there were many of them, aboriginal tribesmen who lurked in the tracks made by elephant and buffalo—the great city might never have existed. It was in the great forest region that extends all along the southern slopes of the Himalayas, and northward, in the far distance, one could see the mighty peaks of the Nepalese Mountains,

spires of white that seemed to pierce the sky.

A few minutes' walk, and the four came upon the skin tents of the band of Jain outlaws who had made the forest their haunt. At the sight of John Stark, and Chunder, leading his horse, they came swarming out of them, fierce-looking men, with a few women and an occasional child.

No pariahs these, no untouchables, but men of the proudest sect in India, the Jains, who had voluntarily chosen to foregather there, under John Stark's directions three months before, with a very definite purpose in mind.

John Stark raised his hand in greeting, then waved the outlaws away. Again he took the young prince by the arm, and they walked together, this time unaccompanied, into the heart of a forest clearing, the ground of which was littered with dead ashes of campfires.

They turned and looked at one another, the tall Englishman and the youth who worshipped him.

"So you have made good use of your freedom here, Rasput Singh," Stark addressed the boy. "When you came here, you were like a child, with neither strength nor fleetness, and now you have become a man."

"Three days ago," answered the prince proudly, "I all but ran down a *sambhur* deer, and, had I had a gun, or a bow and arrow, I could have killed it."

"And the Jains obey you? They are ready to follow you?" asked John Stark.

"They are my people, half-Rajput though I be," replied the boy.

John Stark looked at him thoughtfully. "Tell me," he said, "what you remember. This I have never asked you, for the time had not come. Now it is at hand."

"I remember the palace of my grandfather," answered the boy, "beside the Ganges, and my grandmother, the Begum of Jodhpur, and my mother."

"You remember this clearly?"

"Clearly—yes, Sahib Stark. Clearly, too, the play in the open air and the sunshine, before they took me away. Clearly, too, my uncle's murder, for they stabbed him to death before my eyes."

"Your memory is a good memory, Rasput Singh. What do you remember next?"

For the first time the young prince hesitated.

"I remember the dark dungeon underneath the Palace," he said slowly. "But I was there so long, Sahib Stark, that my earlier memories seem to me like a tale that has been told me, clear though they are."

"Ten years, Rasput Singh. Ten years during which you never saw the light of the sun, save when it set across the Ganges." John Stark's face took on a curious change. There was a bitterness, a grimness, in it that completely altered his appearance. For John Stark was a man of many moods, and all his years of service with the Intelligence Department had not robbed him of his feelings as a human being.

"Ten years, Rasput Singh," he repeated. "At first chained loosely to a wall, then allowed to pace the cell in which you were confined. Kept from death only because the usurper, the reigning Jam, feared the Government of India. Three times he brought you forth, clothed as a prince, instead of in rags, to prove to the English Resident that you were alive and cared for."

"I remember, Sahib Stark, I remember, too, how you released me, when they had chained me to the rock wall again; how you cut the iron bars and rowed me in a boat across the Ganges, and brought me here, three months ago. Does the Sahib think that I forget?"

"No, I do not think that you have forgotten, Rasput Singh," answered Stark. "But now I have come to tell you that you have become a man. You have gained the strength of a man here in these forests. And you are the rightful heir to the throne of Jodhpur."

"Ah-h!" breathed the youth. "I should like to be a king, Sahib Stark. I should like to have revenge upon my uncle, who killed my other uncle before my eyes. I should like to see my grandmother, the Begum, again."

"She knows that you are here, Rasput Singh, and she awaits the day of libera-

tion. I have seen her and talked with her."

"Ah-h!" breathed the prince again.

"Half Jodhpur is Jain, the faith of your grandmother," John Stark went on. "It is the religion of mercy and charity. No deeds of murder have ever stained the Jain faith. Therefore I brought these men here, who served your grandmother in the days when she was the consort of Jodhpur's ruler, so that they might stand back of you in the day of need."

"Yes, Sahib, they will obey me."

"But that is not enough, Rasput Singh. If I have given you the strength of a man, here in these forests, it was in order that you might show that you possessed the courage of a man. Strength without courage is the quality of the ox."

"I am no ox, Sahib Stark."

"In a day or more that shall be proved. For you have heard how the usurper plans to drive the English out of India, beginning first in Jodhpur, by a massacre of the English first, and then of the Jain people. And this is planned for the festival of Kali, which begins tomorrow. Now that you are strong, you must play the part of a man."

"Aye, Sahib, but how shall I play it?"

"That is what I have come here to tell you. You must leave this forest at sunset tonight, and take your men by a night march to the edge of the forests, in the direction of Jodhpur. All night you must march, and then all the next day, and know nothing of weariness."

"That will not be hard, Sahib."

"When you have left the forests behind you, you will make your way along the roads by two's and three's, and enter the city gate, saying that you are forest Jains who have come to attend the festival."

The youth's eyes lit with eagerness. "There will be fighting, Stark Sahib?" he asked.

"It is hoped that there will be little fighting. When you are in full manhood, doubtless there will be wars, but those will be wars abroad, not in the heart of Mother India. But if it should happen that there is need for fighting in Jodhpur, you will fight like the son of Daghra Singh. I know it."

"Aye, Sahib, and then, when I am Prince, in place of the usurper, the highest post of honor shall be yours, and—"

"Keep your swords well hidden. Tell that to your men."

STARK'S face had relaxed into its amused smile again. He had come to love the little eaglet, now bronzed and strong, despite his ten years' captivity in boyhood. He recalled the night when he had taken him, emaciated and half-naked, out of the dungeon beneath the old Palace at Jodhpur.

The escape of the young prince had been a stunning blow to the usurping Jam. All the Central Provinces had been combed for him in vain. Two or three times the Jam's emissaries had nearly hit on the trail, but in the depths of the forest the little eaglet remained secure, under the guardianship of his faithful Jains and Stark Sahib.

And not even the Indian Government was aware of Rasput Singh's escape, for it was Stark's way to keep even the chief officials of the Secret Service ignorant of his plans and doings, until they had been brought to fulfilment.

So much depended upon his work in Jodhpur that he had not even dared to send a cipher communication to Simla. The slightest indiscretion, the least suspicion of his identity, and a knife-thrust, or a bullet through head or heart, would put an end to Stark's usefulness.

In this case, Stark had permitted his fondness for the youthful Prince to temper the quiet gravity with which he usually went about his affairs.

As they turned back from the clearing, a cluster of Jains came running toward them, shouting. Behind them Stark saw a man of the runner caste, trotting like a dog, tongue hanging out and elbows moving rhythmically with his lower limbs. He had probably run for twenty miles thus without halting.

The runner paused in front of Stark. "A *chit*, Sahib," he said, handing him the letter.

Stark glanced at the inscription in Hindustani, then unfolded it, breaking the

heavy seal of golden wax. He read the contents quickly, then struck a match and let the missive burn, while the gathering group about him watched his face. But they learned nothing there.

"Events are moving more swiftly than I expected," Stark addressed the Prince. "It will be necessary to start well before sundown, and to travel fast. When you reach the cultivated lands, separate into small groups, as I have instructed you, and travel along separate roads, telling all whom you meet that you are pilgrims to the shrine of Kali."

He turned to Bose and Chunder. "You travel with the Prince," he said, "and you will protect him with your lives."

"The Sahib knows that!" cried the Jain Chunder.

John Stark took the Prince by the shoulders, and gray eyes and brown eyes met in a look of perfect understanding. Then Stark gripped Rasput Singh by the hand and walked to where his horse was being held by one of the Jains. He swung into the saddle, and in another moment he had turned and was cantering away among the trees.

John Stark's appearances were always unexpected, and his movements always secretive. There was not a man among that group would have dared to follow him. But, if he had entered the forest as John Stark, it was in a very different guise that he would emerge from it into the cultivated lands that stretched for miles around Jodhpur. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

AT THE PALACE

BEILA had not anticipated that Major Rowland and his wife would call to take her to the Begum's reception. She didn't quite know whether she was glad or sorry when, a half hour before she was expecting to leave the hotel, they were announced at her room over the hotel telephone.

On the whole, she was not sorry. With her aunt's death, the whole purpose of her coming to Jodhpur seemed to have fallen into the background. Unlike most of the

Chadwick family, Leila paid little thought to the money that should be coming to her. She had, in fact, rather thought of making Major Rowland her confidant in the matter—of accepting his wife's invitation to their bungalow, if it was renewed.

She went downstairs, to find them waiting for her in the reception room.

"Thought we'd drive you to the Palace, Miss Chadwick," the Major explained. "There's likely to be a frightful crush; it's the old lady's annual affair, though of course we shan't see her. We don't generally stay more than an hour or so. Colonel and Mrs. Bradley are extremely anxious to meet you. No, we've declared an armistice on the matter we talked about yesterday," he added, smiling, "at least for this afternoon."

Outside the hotel a smart English limousine was drawn up, with a soldier chauffeur at the wheel. The three got in and the car began to weave its way through the traffic in the direction opposite to that which Leila had taken on the night before.

"I'm disappointed we're not likely to see the Begum," said Leila.

"I expect you've been looking forward to seeing the interior of an Indian harem," laughed Major Rowland. "Thrones and priceless jewels, and all that. As a matter of fact, the old lady has been living in more or less enforced retirement ever since the present Jam came to the throne. This annual invitation is simply for the benefit of the European ladies at Jodhpur—issued in the Begum's name as a matter of ceremony.

"By the way, I wonder if you've had any news of your aunt?" he added, looking at Leila shrewdly. "I hope she's better. I'm sure we can arrange an interview for you through the Jam."

No, Major Rowland was not bluffing. Evidently he did not know that Hannah Chadwick was dead. For a moment Leila was tempted to confide the truth to him. Then she decided to wait until she was again asked to be the Rowlands' guest at their bungalow. She turned the question aside with a light remark, and sat silent, watching the throngs in the streets.

The road that ran down to the Palace

was broad and paved. The Ganges came into sight again, covered with boats, the towers and cupolas of the temples on both shores looking still more imposing than when seen by moonlight. Beyond the bluffs could be seen hundreds of men bathing in the holy waters of the sacred stream.

The long palace was a fantastic thing. Parts of it were of wood, and seemed centuries old; others, comparatively recent, of brick and masonry. The whole was a hodgepodge of construction, with high, barred towers irregularly placed near the center, and a steep cliff dropping almost vertically to the waters of the Ganges.

Carriages and cars were already drawn up within the courtyard. From behind came the same cloying odor of jasmine, and Leila could see the wide stretches of lawn beneath the old deodars, and the blossoming hedges and wide strips of flowers.

Inside the Palace uniformed flunkeys and guards received the guests, who passed in a long line to where the Jam stood, surrounded by a suite in brilliant uniforms, to receive his guests, in a long room littered with gilt furniture and lined with mirrors.

IT was with a quiver of fear that Leila heard her name called, and found herself curtsying to the Prince. Would he betray the fact of their meeting the night before? No, not a muscle of his face quivered, and next moment the ordeal was over and the girl heard Mrs. Rowland presenting her to Mrs. Bradley. Then the Colonel was introduced, an elderly man with a lined face and reddish-white hair, who looked at Leila thoughtfully.

"Let's go out and see the gardens," he suggested. "They are serving tea in the big pagoda."

He gave Leila his arm and ushered her through the throng of whites and blacks who were swarming out of the Palace. They paced between hedges of flowering aloes. The sheer beauty of the scene almost took Leila's breath away.

The sun was already dipping toward the horizon, over the crowded Ganges. The cool of the evening had relieved the sweltering heat of the day.

"Shall we go and have tea?" asked the Colonel.

"My head aches," said Leila. "I'd rather sit down for a while, until that mob has been served."

"My sentiments exactly," answered Bradley, escorting her to a long stone bench on which were flat cushions in brilliant colors. Leila wondered where the others had gone, whether this was to be the preliminary to another bout such as she had had with Major Rowland the afternoon before.

"I suppose," she said, "you are going to tell me that I must leave Jodhpur on the morning train."

"I'm afraid not," replied Colonel Bradley, wrinkling his lined forehead. He spoke with an air of weariness. "Yesterday I might have said so. Today, no! But it is essential that you accept Mrs. Rowland's invitation to become her guest for a while."

"May I ask what has changed your decision to have me deported as—as an undesirable alien?"

"I am afraid you have little conception what a very important person you are in Jodhpur," replied Colonel Bradley. "Especially now, when the festival of Kali is beginning. I do not need to tell you about your aunt, nor"—he lowered his voice—"how unscrupulous persons have utilized what I believe to have been a genuine religious impulse for political ends."

"And so you want me in Jodhpur now?"

"Miss Chadwick, I assure you that I could not guarantee your safety for another night at the hotel. There are wheels within wheels in a very complicated political drama. So long as your aunt is alive—"

So he, too, didn't know! Leila looked at Colonel Bradley's worn face. He was not the debonaire type of officer whom she had met on the P. & O. steamship on the voyage out. Rather a man grown gray in the service of India's government, bearing his responsibilities heavily.

"I want your confidence, Colonel Bradley," said the girl. "I should have spoken to Major Rowland if he hadn't threatened me with expulsion. I may as well tell you—my aunt is dead!"

"What?" Colonel Bradley swung round

on the stone seat and faced Leila squarely.

"When did she die? How do you know?"

"I think she must have died a day or two ago. I know, because I saw her body last night in the Temple of All the Gods."

"Last night? Who brought you there?"

"A lawyer named Bhopra Lal, who is handling my aunt's estate. She wrote to me in America two months ago, telling me that she had been fooled out of twelve million dollars. She had to bribe a man to take her letter. She wanted her money to go to me, and she trusted Bhopra Lal. I'm not so sure about him.

"Last night he took me to the Temple, and I found that she was dead. The—what do you call him?—the Jam of Jodhpur was in the room where she was lying in state. Now I don't know what to do. I don't care much about the money. I don't expect to get much of it. I came because my aunt sent for me, and—and I don't know what there is for me to do now."

Colonel Bradley took Leila's hand in his. "My dear young lady, if only you had come to me! This is India, not your America—nothing is what it seems to be. I'm glad you told me, very glad for your own sake. I am going to take you back to the cantonment. Meanwhile, I think we have sat here long enough. Let's have some tea, and a light chat about nothing in particular, because, I assure you, we are under close observation."

And as he spoke, Leila saw the tall figure of the Moslem, Kemal, emerge out of a side path and begin to pace the path in front of them. He wore his green turban and an embroidered jacket over his white pajamas, and a long sword swung loosely at his side in an embossed scabbard. As he passed, with his insolent, jaunty stride, Leila looked after him in dismay.

"Who is that man?" she whispered, in sudden terror.

"Probably one of the Palace attendants," replied the Colonel, rising. "Have you seen him before, Miss Chadwick?"

"He was almost the first man I saw when I arrived at Jodhpur. He spoke to me at the station and helped me with my suitcases. It was he who ordered the driver to take me to the European Hotel."

"A spy of the priests perhaps. Or possibly—" Colonel Bradley left that sentence unfinished. "Let's go and get some tea," he said.

The gardens were still thronged, although a procession of carriages was already beginning to leave the courtyard. The Rowlands and two or three English officers were seated about tables in the pagoda. A very black man, clad in a gorgeous uniform, and speaking with a very pronounced Oxford accent, was telling a funny story. For this reception was one of the rare occasions on which natives and whites met on a basis of social equality.

An attendant poured cups of hot, sweet, sticky Indian tea, and a pert youth, in white pajamas with a red sash, offered Leila an assortment of cloying sweets and confectionery on a tray of beaten brass. She had just finished her cup when an obese old attendant, wearing a uniform of gold and scarlet, came up to her and addressed her in the vernacular.

"What does he say?" Leila asked Colonel Bradley.

Bradley spoke and the man answered him. "He says," he answered, "that Her Highness, the Begum, requests the pleasure of your presence. It's getting rather late, but you'll have to see her, of course," he added. "We'll wait for you. Can't affront the Begum, you know."

He whispered: "I expect she's curious to see you on account of your aunt. If there's an interpreter there, or anyone who looks as if she spoke English, be very careful what you say."

Leila nodded, and feeling rather scared, accompanied the functionary, who led the way toward the base of one of the cupolas, and then stepped deferentially aside for the girl to enter.

The guard at the door was the tall Moslem in the green turban of the *hadji*, or pilgrim.

At the sight of him Leila was hardly able to proceed. There seemed something ominous in the man's presence, in the look he gave her. And yet there was no longer arrogance in his look. He seemed to be trying to convey some message to her, some warning. . . .

THE hall within was almost in darkness. The functionary, treading closely behind Leila, said something that caused her to halt. He raised a curtain, disclosing an enormous room, shuttered, but well lighted with butter-lamps.

In the center of it a stout woman's figure was standing, clothed in voluminous veils, which left even the face invisible. Only the tiara, sparkling with gems, betrayed the fact that this was the Begum of Jodhpur, formerly regnant queen, and wife of the predecessor of the usurper.

Clocks of all kinds were ticking around the gaudily furnished room, varying considerably in time, but a cuckoo clock upon the mantelpiece immediately behind the Begum showed that it was within a minute or two of six.

Leila courtied, waited. The functionary had withdrawn. There was no one in the room except the Begum and Leila. The veiled figure took a step forward, threw back a veil, another veil, and revealed the face of an intelligent woman of about sixty-five, dark, but with snow-white hair.

A hand advanced out of the shroud-like garments, the fingers loaded with rings, and bracelets, bright with jewels, about the slender wrist.

"Child, you are not married, old though you are?" The words were spoken in precise English, but as if the language had been learned only from a book. "I was a mother, and I saw my son cut to pieces before my eyes. But his blood still lives—the boy whom I shall see again!"

The words were uttered almost in a rhapsody, as if the Begum was speaking to herself in the foreign language that she had learned.

"Child, you are in grave danger. I have brought you here to save you, since only the Master of the *senana* dares enter the women's apartments. Come with me!"

Leila was astounded, yet somehow had less consciousness of fear than when she entered the door at the base of the cupola. The Begum's hand closed on her wrist, long nails biting into the skin like talons. The old woman almost dragged the girl through a doorway beside the mantel and into another room, where three young In-

dian girls were seated, embroidering by the light of a large swinging lamp.

The Begum, without speaking, snatched the entire robe and headpiece from the nearest girl and flung it about Leila. She pointed to another door at the farther end of the room.

"Run!" she cried. "Run quickly! You will find safety there!"

Leila, staring at the old Begum, heard the "cuckoo, cuckoo!" of the clock in the room she had just left. Following which, the harsh, metallic clang of a temple bell. Then the discharge of a cannon.

And simultaneously an outburst of shouting within and without the Palace, and far up the streets leading down to the Ganges, and from the river itself, a cry that was neither a welcome nor a call to prayer. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

ON THE GANGES

AS Leila still stood motionless, the Begum sprang at her and dragged her to the door she had indicated, and thrust her through. Then the door slammed behind her, and the harsh click of the key sounded like a faint tap as that fierce yelling filled the evening air.

Leila found herself in still another room, with a farther open door and a lamp above it, showing a flight of steps. But she was not alone—and there was no safety here. For facing her was the Moslem, Kemal. She shrank back with a cry. She knew that she was trapped now, hopelessly.

Then, as he moved toward her, she leaped forward, beating at his face with her fists, and trying to gain the doorway beyond.

He caught her by the arms, holding her motionless. "Keep quiet and understand!" he hissed in her ear. "I am an Englishman, and I am here to save you!"

There was no mistaking the English accents. Leila ceased to struggle; she stared at John Stark in amazement.

"To save me? Why? From whom?" she cried.

"Come with me!" was all Stark answered.

He drew her through the room. The

uproar was increasing; the shrieks of the mob seemed to come from everywhere. In the passage outside, where the flight of steps ran down, was a small window. Leila stopped and looked out.

She gasped in horror at what she saw. The view was of the Palace grounds, and Major Rowland and Colonel Bradley were standing back, trying to protect their wives against the swarms that were attacking them. Each of them was laying about him with one of the iron-legged tables from the pagoda, and a half dozen natives lay stunned about them.

Two other officers were fighting with their fists, and trying desperately to get to the women, while a third lay stretched out on the grass, bleeding from a sword cut on the head, and making a vain attempt to rise.

"Can't you save them?" cried Leila.

John Stark's hand was clapped across the girl's mouth. "I came here to save you," he answered, "from a worse fate than you can imagine. As for those officers and the women, the Jam dares not let them be killed. He is holding them as hostages, because all Jodhpur is in revolt against English supremacy. Do you understand now?"

And he might have added that upon his success or failure in saving Leila an empire's destiny depended.

Fascinated, horrified, and yet unable to tear herself away from the window, Leila saw Colonel Bradley go down under the flat stroke of a sword that dropped upon his head and stunned him. Major Rowland was down, struggling to rise under the weight of a dozen men. The screaming women were being dragged away. But the Palace guards were keeping back the half naked mob that had swarmed into the grounds, intent on murder.

"Save them, I tell you! Save them, or I shall go to them!" cried Leila again.

John Stark simply lifted her in his arms and began to carry her down the stairs. All her efforts to free herself were futile.

At the bottom of the stairs a guard appeared, running upward. At the sight of Stark carrying Leila, he uttered a shout of exultation, and spat upon the girl's robe;

John Stark set Leila down, drew a pistol from beneath his uniform and shot the man dead.

Calmly he turned to the girl and pointed down the stairway. This time Leila made no resistance. The horror of that swift death, the look of surprise on the face of the guard as he tumbled forward, blood spurting from his breast, had unnerved her to the point of fainting. Another turn of the steps cut off something of the roar overhead, which now subsided to a dull murmur, punctuated by the occasional shrill scream of a woman.

At the foot of this flight a passage extended, with cells on either side, and wizened old men moving to and fro, swinging great bunches of long keys. Yellow men, nude save for loin-cloths, chattering like apes, hereditary prisonkeepers, they formed one of the lowest of the Indian castes.

They came cringing up to Stark, evidently under the impression that he was bringing them a prisoner, but at his contemptuous shout, drew hastily away.

JOHNS STARK took Leila by the hand and led her into a recess in the rock wall. Nothing was visible, but the girl heard him fitting a key into a lock and saw shoulders heave as he made the effort to turn it. Then she heard the grating of the rusty wards.

This was, in fact, a secret exit from the subterranean dungeons, known only to Stark and the Begum, and by means of it more than one prisoner of state had escaped in days gone by—or had been carried out, to be fed to the Ganges crocodiles.

Stark was only just in time, for the uproar had broken out overhead again. The guards were dragging the captive officers and the women down to the dungeons.

He heaved the door open, thrust Leila through the entrance, followed, and pulled the door to behind him, straining with all his might until the click of the lock was heard. And now all the sounds outside died down to a faint and hardly audible murmur.

Holding the girl closely to him, Stark began to negotiate the rocky passage, from

whose roof great drops of water fell on their heads and faces. The passage was narrow and tortuous. Once Leila's shoulder collided with a ledge of rock, and she uttered a cry. Stark held her more closely to him.

Then a faint patch of light appeared ahead of them. Stark stopped short and began to move forward with Leila very slowly, feeling his way along the passage, which was now barely wide enough to admit a single person.

But that light was moonlight, growing stronger every moment. And with it, the faint sounds of the uproar began to be heard again, coming not from behind them, but apparently from somewhere in front.

Then of a sudden the majestic Ganges came into sight once more, the lights twinkling from the temples on the opposite shore and from the boats that plied upon its surface. They had reached the exit.

Crouching down behind a ledge of rock, they could see the waters lapping almost at their feet; and looking up, they could see the bluff, and a carriage apparently moving along the extreme edge of it. They had made their exit immediately beneath the Palace, which, however, was cut off from their view by the bluff overhead.

To right and left appeared the deserted bathing houses. No one was stirring on the stretch of foul-smelling mud at the water's edge, but bells were clanging from the temples, and at intervals there arose that shrill cry of fanaticism and hate.

Leila clutched John Stark's arm. "What are we going to do?" she whispered.

"I am going to try to save you. Don't ask me any questions."

"And those people—those poor women those fiends have taken?"

"In saving you, I hope to save them."

LEILA looked at him. An Englishman, yes, despite the stain upon his face and hands, and the fantastic Moslem attire.

John Stark, who had taken off his turban in the rock passage, replaced it, winding it about his head. He motioned to Leila to remain where she was, and stepped out along the edge of the water. She heard him give a long, low whistle.

In another moment the waves began to lap more vigorously. Then the bow of a boat appeared, rowed by a single, almost nude oarsman. It moved slowly toward the exit from the tunnel and grated on the stones that strewed the mud.

Stark motioned the girl to enter. She stepped into the frail craft, and Stark, who had held the boat for her, followed. He took a spare pair of oars and pushed off from the wall. In another moment they were pulling out upon the broad bosom of the Ganges.

It had grown dark with the swiftness of an Indian nightfall, and the city twinkled with lights; but northward, high above the town, a great spire of flame was shooting up to the stars, and two or three other conflagrations were burning in the heart of the city itself. The Palace had suddenly grown silent, but the confused shouts of mobs came from various quarters, and the temple bells were clashing unrhythmically.

Then the Palace came into sight, as the boat pulled farther out into the stream, dark save for the faintest luminosity that shone through the barred windows of the cupolas. But the Temple of All the Gods, adjoining, was ablaze with lights, and a great bell somewhere within was clanging unceasingly.

John Stark looked up at the spire of flame high on the hill and muttered something. He looked at Leila as she sat facing him in the boat.

"If you don't understand," he said, "I want you to try to. Jodhpur has risen against the foreigners. That fire is the cantonment. Happily there were no English soldiers there, only a few native troops, who have probably gone over to the rioters. As for Colonel and Mrs. Bradley, and the Rowlands, and the captured officers, their lives are safe for the present. Everything depends upon my getting you away. Do you understand now?"

"I understand what you say, but I don't know what you mean," Leila answered faintly. "Where are you taking me?"

"I have two horses waiting on the farther shore. If we can win it, nothing can stop me from getting you to a place of safety. Then the Jam will find himself

checkmated, and will learn what it means to pit himself against the might of England, and to imprison Englishmen and Englishwomen who were his guests."

He pulled hard on his right oar as a scow came careening along under a great lateen sail, avoiding a collision by shooting dexterously beneath her bows. A man shouted curses at him from the deck, and John Stark shouted back something that silenced him. The boat pulled slowly away from the scow, yet Leila could see that the two oarsmen were using her as a cover to shield them from observation from the shore.

In the bright moonlight she could see what looked like a pile of sleeping forms on board the scow. But surely sleepers were never piled up in that unceremonious fashion, one upon another! And, as the scow drifted past, Leila saw two men lift one of the forms in their arms and heave it overboard.

It splashed into the muddy, turbid stream, turned over in a little swirl and eddy, and floated downstream.

"What's that?" cried Leila, her nerves unstrung to the point of helplessness. "They're murdering those people. They—they—"

Another body splashed overboard, whirled, eddied, and was gone. John Stark rested his oars for a moment and leaned forward.

"Just a corpse ship," he said in Leila's ear. "Bodies of the dead, whom they are committing to the holy Ganges." He turned and spoke to the oarsman behind him, and both men began to pull briskly across the river.

Another body went overboard—another, and another. A trail of boats was following the corpse ship, presumably the mourners, as carriages follow a hearse at a land funeral.

LEILA and John Stark were clear of the corpse ship now; they were in the middle of the river. But of a sudden a launch came darting up the stream, a searchlight playing at her bows. It shone full upon Leila's face, it picked up Stark and the oarsman; the launch altered its

direction and made directly for the little boat. As it came nearer, the engine chugging and churning up the water, Leila could see the muzzle of a gun in its bows; and behind this, the figures of half a dozen natives in uniform.

She knew what that meant and sank back in her seat. As in a dream she saw the Englishman draw his pistol from beneath his uniform, take aim and fire.

Yells, screeches, the violent movements of the launch as it bore directly down upon them. But the gun was not fired. The Jam of Jodhpur wanted Leila alive!

Stark fired again, and a figure toppled sidewise in the launch and plopped into the water. Next moment the launch struck the boat full amidships, her keel crashing through the frail timbers. In an instant the boat filled and sank. Leila found herself struggling in the water.

An expert swimmer, she fought desperately in the turbid stream. She saw John Stark swimming beside her. His arm went around her. For a few moments they were in darkness, as the searchlight wavered, and Stark was drawing Leila toward the looming shore with powerful movements of his arm and leg muscles.

Then the searchlight picked them up, and Leila, blinded by the intolerable glare, felt like a moth in a candle-flame. A boat-hook shot out and ripped her clothing. She fought free of it. It came again and caught her.

John Stark was clinging desperately to her and trying to free her. But the launch was at their sides. Looking upward into the circle of the searchlight's glare, Leila saw the dark, jeering faces, and she heard the fierce shouts of triumph as she was hauled backward.

A man was seated in the stern. Even at that moment, Leila could recognize the swarthy features of the Jam. Even at that moment it flashed through her mind that her capture meant more to him than she had understood, if he had headed the pursuit in person.

She was being hauled to the side of the launch. John Stark was treading water, trying to strike out at the faces of the guards in the boat. A pistol shot rang out.

Suddenly he collapsed, disappeared, appeared again on the breast of the swirling waters. Then he was gone.

Hands were stretched out, and Leila, dripping and half unconscious, was hauled aboard.

Faintly she was conscious of the Jam's leering face as he bent over her. Then consciousness itself faded into blackest oblivion.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE POISONED PITCHER



PUNGENT aromatic scent in her nostrils, and the taste of some strong liquor in her throat, brought Leila back to consciousness. Faintly, at first, she became aware that she was alive, and of the throbbing in her head, but the utter fatigue that possessed her left her incapable of either thought or movement.

Thought was the first to return. Where was she? In the Hotel European? Had she been sick? The memories of the events that had occurred since her arrival in Jodhpur began to stir in her—the visit to the Temple of All the Gods, and the sight of the dead old woman there; then the Begum's reception. Then—suddenly she remembered the sequence of incredible happenings, the attack upon the officers and their wives, her rescue by the mysterious Englishman, the corpse ship, and the battle in the waves.

She tried to cry out, but only a muffled murmur came from her throat. This, however, was enough to bring a figure to her side. It was that of an Indian girl, lithe, tigerish, with bright eyes that looked into Leila's in derision.

Leila was aware that her own eyes were open and that she had been conscious of her surroundings for some little time without realizing it.

She was lying on a soft couch in what seemed an underground room, for a faint light came through some heavy shutters outside a window that was set almost at the top of the circular room.

Lamps illuminated it, and now Leila saw that there were some half dozen other Indian girls, following in the wake of the

one who had come to her side, watching her with curiosity.

Hard, bright eyes and unveiled faces. No pity, no sympathy—only amusement at her predicament.

Leila's eyes traveled down to her own body as she lay on the couch. She discovered that she was dressed in soft, clinging Indian silks. She saw that her fingernails had been dyed with henna, making them a brighter scarlet than those of the most up-to-date New York girl.

She sat up with an effort against the pillows, and an outburst of scornful merriment came from the watching girls. One of them began to pirouette, and then twirled with incredible velocity.

Leila cried out something in English, glanced uncertainly about her. Titters of laughter answered her; the girl with the tigerish body and bright eyes pushed her back upon the couch.

Leila sank back and closed her eyes. She was still too weak to struggle, almost to wonder where she was or what had happened to her. But she could see the Englishman struggling to save her in the turbid Ganges water, and his sudden disappearance as the pistol shot rang out.

Faintly she heard the girls conversing about her. Time was passing as in a dreadful dream. Then, of a sudden, Leila was aware that a man had come into the room. She opened her eyes again and saw the girls on hands and knees, with foreheads pressed against the ground.

The man came to the couch on which she was lying. Leila recognized the Jam.

HE was attired in a uniform of white, with a red sash across his shoulder. His dark eyes blazed with triumph as he looked down at her. He turned and spoke a word to the cringing girls, who scuttled through a curtain, leaving him alone with Leila.

"Well?" he asked, standing beside the couch and looking down at her. "How are you feeling?"

Leila made no reply. Her horror and loathing of the man were stronger than her fear. The Jam recognized it, for a look of admiration came into his eyes.

"Ah, you are an American! I have heard of your women, how fearless they are. More even than those Englishwomen who were taken captive. I have always wanted to know such a woman as you, a fearless one, with a spirit as great as mine.

"Do you know where you are?" he went on. "Well, I shall tell you. You are in the chambers of the dancing girls of your late aunt's temple. You did not know that your Puritan New England aunt had accepted all our Indian customs, did you?"

Then into Leila's mind there came the recollection of an article she had read years before in a missionary magazine, about the women who were attached to the temples. Her fear became stronger than her loathing of the Jam. She struggled up on the couch, eyes wide with terror.

The Prince saw and interpreted that look, and again the expression of triumph came into his eyes. He seated himself upon the edge of the couch. His eyes were bright, like a snake's.

"The foolish Englishman who tried to free you is dead," he said. "A man named John Stark, a secret agent of what *was* the Indian Government. All India has risen against the British Raj. In a few days its powers will have been restricted to the few fortified cities that it can hold until the strength of awakened India forces it to capitulate."

"Traitor! Liar!" Leila cried.

The Jam smiled. "That is the way I like to hear you talk," he answered, "for you are a woman of spirit, and you have a great part to play in awakened India. The moment I saw you, I knew that you were my destined bride. Great honor shall be yours in my palace. You shall be my favorite. You will come to love me, and you shall work with me for the new India that I am going to build."

He caught Leila's hands as she struck out desperately at him.

"No, all that is useless," he smiled. "For there is one thing you do not understand. *You are the only white man or woman left alive in Jodhpur!*"

"Liar!" Leila cried. "You haven't murdered those helpless prisoners whom you took so treacherously when they were your

guests—you wouldn't dare! You are too afraid of the English Government—you know what has happened in the past to traitors like you!"

The Jam's face grew hot with fury. Suddenly he caught her to him and began devouring her face and throat with kisses. She was helpless in his arms. "It is the shell of a woman whom he is embracing," she thought. "It is not I."

Suddenly the Jam released her.

"Do you know why I am not taking you to my palace now?" he asked. "I will tell you. It is because the incarnation of the goddess must be a maiden who has never known love. And that is something hard to find outside the *zenana*. I can look in your face and see that you have never known love."

Incongruous, horribly incongruous, were the thoughts that flashed through Leila's mind, of beaux in Philadelphia, of the boy she had thought she was in love with two years before, and allowed to kiss her. But the Jam didn't mean that. What did he mean? What was that about the incarnation of the goddess?

John Stark—that was the name he had spoken. John Stark, watching over her, trying to help her, as Rowland and Bradley had done! His white face as he went plunging to his death in the swirling Ganges water!

THE Jam was gone. Leila lay upon the couch. One by one the Temple girls stole in to look at her. They were not tittering at her now. They were incensed, because they knew that the Jam had chosen her for his favors. Hard, vengeful glances, and low mutterings against the *Mlech* woman—yet they left her alone.

Leila lay motionless, trying to collect some inner strength that would sustain her.

The faint light that came through the shuttered window was beginning to fade. Twenty hours must have passed since John Stark had gone to his death in the Ganges. Night was at hand. And with the coming of the second night, new sounds began to penetrate into the subterranean haunt of the Temple girls, confused noises, as of a gathering multitude.

The bells had begun to clang again. Gongs were being struck, conches were being blown. The uproar was increasing. Louder and louder grew the shouts immediately above the round house that contained the Temple girls. And Leila had the presentiment that her own fate would not be long in tarrying.

A little slave girl entered with a brass tray and brought it to the couch on which Leila lay. There was a dish of steaming curry on it, and a pitcher of sherbet. Leila motioned the girl away. Instantly the Temple girls were on their feet, protesting.

"You must eat, you must drink!" one of them exclaimed. "You must get strong and well. We mean no harm. We are but poor girls of the Temple."

"See, if you think the food is poisoned, I taste myself of it—so," said another, putting a spoonful of the curry in her mouth and sipping the sherbet. "Our Prince, the Jam, he pays you high honor. You are our friend, you see?"

Leila realized that her feeling of intense physical weakness came partly from hunger. It was long since she had tasted food. But she couldn't bring herself to eat. Her thirst, on the other hand, was too strong for her to be able to resist the pitcher of sherbet. She took a long, delicious draught of it.

And even if the food was poisoned, what did she care? She wished that it *was* poisoned, as she lay back on the couch again—but there was some elixir in that drink that ran like fire through her veins. She was growing stronger. And with that strength, a sort of recklessness was coming over her. She was no longer afraid of the Jam.

She sat up on the couch, watching the girls talking together in whispers, and directing furtive glances at her. She felt as if her being was divided into two parts—one, the girl who had lain on the couch in terror of the fate destined for her, the other a being for whom no fate in life could hold any more terrors.

What had the Jam meant when he said that the incarnation of the goddess must be a maiden who had never known love?

Leila heard herself laughing unsteadily. She was reckless. She was afraid of no one, least of all of these Temple girls, recoiling

from her, watching her every motion like cats. If she could get a dagger somewhere and the Jam came—

Leila tried to rise to her feet and found that her legs were paralyzed to the waist. Rapidly that numbness was extending up her arms to the shoulders.

This was not intoxication. The sherbet she had drunk had been poisoned!

Leila fell back once more. She saw the girls laughing at her. They came toward the couch and stood on either side of it, jeering.

She was lying among the pillows, unable so much as to move a finger. And yet her senses were not numbed. She could see the dim interior of the room as plainly as ever, and the girls about her. She could feel the touch of their fingers. There was a tiny stab of pain as one of them maliciously jabbed her in the wrist with a pointed hairpin.

A man was coming into the room. Two men, for though Leila could not turn her head to see them, she was able to detect the dissonance of their footsteps. The girls drew back, but they did not this time prostrate themselves upon the floor.

Evidently neither of the newcomers was the Jam.

LEILA, now unconscious of fear, aware only of a sort of secret exaltation, waited till the two should disclose themselves. Quickly one of them came within the range of her vision.

He was a very aged priest. In one hand he held a conch, a huge shell, stained a vivid scarlet; in the other was a sort of wand.

He looked at her, bent over and closed her eyelids. They opened instantly again. He nodded as if satisfied, and spoke to his companion, who approached in turn.

It was Bhopra Lal, no longer attired in the conventional frock coat he had worn at the Hotel European, but in a white robe that displayed one black shoulder, almost lost in a roll of fat.

The Hindu grinned malevolently. "You hear me, Miss Chadwick?" he asked. "Ah, what a fool you were! You did not know that I am a Brahmin of highest caste, and an Initiate into the Mysteries of the Temple!"

He chuckled. "Yes, almost as big a fool as that crazy old woman, your aunt," he said. "Did you think that Brahmins would let all that money be taken from the Temple?"

Leila tried to cry out, but her throat muscles refused to function. She tried again to struggle, but she lay upon the couch like an inert figure of stone. Bhopra Lal turned and spoke to the girls.

Leila was lifted in their arms. Six of them, as if they had been pall-bearers, carried her from the room into a dark corridor.

CHAPTER EIGHT

STARK PLAYS HIS HAND

JOHAN STARK had trained his muscles to almost perfect coördination, but he had trained his mind still better. Just as he had been willing to abstain from useless intervention when the treacherous attack was made upon the English officers and their wives, so he had realized, as the launch closed in on himself and Leila, that the only chance lay in feigning death.

The bullet that was fired at him had grazed his ear, but it was dark enough on the Ganges, despite the moonlight, to make his next movements uncertain. Instantly he had dived beneath the waters of the foul-smelling stream.

He knew that the Indian *mugger*, or crocodile, unlike its kind in other parts of the world, is essentially pacific, feeding on the carrion that floats down the Ganges daily, never attacking a moving object. The crocodiles were the least of his worries. He swam under water with powerful strokes, until, his breath exhausted, he was forced to come to the surface.

The launch was some distance away. Its searchlight was still wavering over the surface of the water, but there was small chance of its picking him up. Nevertheless, Stark dived again and swam once more.

This time, when he reached the surface, he collided with a human form. For an instant he had his hand stretched out to grapple it. But then he knew what it was. It was one of the ghastly bodies of the dead, committed to the Ganges water in

the belief that their souls would thereby either secure the ineffable bliss of Nirvana, or be reborn as the highest of the human race—in other words, as Brahmins.

John Stark guessed that his identity was suspected, and he knew that so long as he believed there was a possibility that he lived, the Jam would never cease to attempt his capture. The searchlight was again wavering over the dark waters, and this time it was coming slowly toward the place where Stark was floating.

Treading water, John Stark quickly divested himself of his clothing. In a moment he was nude, save for the loincloth which, with his stained body, enabled him to pass as a *sudra*, a member of the despised class of outcasts. Then he turned upon his back and floated beside the floating corpse.

There were other corpses around him. Quietly Stark paddled among these grotesque remnants of humanity, until he was in the midst of them.

That was when the launch's searchlight found him. But the native behind the searchlight saw only a number of dead men being carried away by the sacred stream, on its long course into the Bay of Bengal. There was nothing to distinguish Stark from one of the corpses.

Letting himself float quietly, Stark watched the launch pull away in the direction of the palace. Then he struck out, with powerful strokes, toward the north shore.

Here, where the suburbs of Jodhpur stretched away in an almost unending succession of miserable hovels, were the miles-long stretches of bathing places, enabling pilgrims from all corners of the peninsula to acquire merit by immersing themselves in the holy water. Stark reached one of these beaches, and hauling himself out, lay down to pant for a few moments. . . .

THE bathing had ceased at sundown. The *poojari*, the bathmaster, squatting outside his hut at the head of the beach, spied the newcomer, however, and came hastening down. As Stark stood up in his loincloth, he recoiled with a cry of anger: "Accursed *sudra*, who has profaned our holy stream? Keep back from me, lest the moon cast thy shadow upon me!"

John Stark smiled. "*Poojari*, I am a Jain," he said, "whom robbers flung overboard from their fishing smack, after I had paid my passage to Calcutta. Hell-destined ones, they stripped me of all my clothes save this!" He pointed to his loincloth.

The bathmaster came forward, reassured. No *sudra* would have dared lie as to his caste, unless he wished to be reborn as a worm or beetle—those who were sceptical of their status in the complex society of India became either Christians or Moslems. The old man salaamed.

"I did not know, Jain, when I saw thee lying there. Of late the outcasts have become bolder than within the memory of man. A Jain, thou sayest?"

Stark repeated the first item of the Jain faith. It was the *poojari's* turn to cringe, for the Jains, an offshoot of the Hindus, held their heads high in Jodhpur.

"Well, fool, what art thou waiting for?" demanded Stark. "Make the caste mark upon my forehead, which was washed off by the holy water."

"Immediately, immediately!" stammered the old man. "Be pleased to come with me."

HE led the way to a cubicle adjoining his hut, where, after bathing, the Hindus resorted to have their caste-marks repainted on their foreheads, in red or yellow ochre. Quickly he made the Jain caste mark on Stark's.

"Now clothing," said Stark. "Am I to walk naked through the streets, and be held up to derision as a *sudra*?"

"Jain, I am a *poojari* man, and now that the English Raj has been driven from India, who knows how much the rupee will be worth?"

"Thou shalt be paid, *poojari*. But drawers and a tunic I must have."

The old man led the way grumbling into his hut. In a minute or two Stark, equipped with the essentials of Indian clothing, had left the old man and was striding through the mean streets on the north shore of the river.

For an hour and more he walked at a swift pace, until the everlasting suburbs began to thin out. Patches of shrubbery appeared, little plantations of mangroves

and oranges, small, isolated habitations. Stark approached a shrine of Vishnu, set in a small grove, and whistled. A man came forward.

"It is the Sahib!" he exclaimed.

"It is the Sahib, Chunder. Where is he whom I ordered thee to protect with thine own life? And where is Bose?"

"They are both in the grove, Sahib, awaiting you."

"The Prince?" demanded Stark, in a voice that made the other tremble.

"Sahib, Sahib, did you not call him the little eaglet? When he learned that two men with horses were to meet you here, nothing sufficed him but that he should accompany them. This being so, and all our arguments unavailing, we took their place. In the grove you will find the eaglet, Sahib, awaiting you."

Stark strode forward. Now, among the shadowy deodars, he saw the outlines of two horses, and a man and the young Prince. At his approach, the youth ran forward, waving a long sword, the Indian *dah*.

"Nay, put up thy weapon, eaglet," Stark laughed.

"It is Sahib Stark!" There was worship in the boy's tone.

"It is I. Art thou minded to play a man's part with me tonight?" asked Stark.

"Ah-h, Sahib, I ask nothing more."

"Good," said Stark. He turned to Chunder. "You have your sword, as I instructed you?"

"I have it, Sahib."

"And the others?"

"They are already in Jodhpur, gathered in the Jain Temple."

"Then they will receive their orders. Do you and Bose ride back to the forest and await us. There is no more for you to do in Jodhpur. I take the princeling with me. Also your sword and cloak."

The Jain handed them to Stark without hesitation. Stark wrapped the cloak about his shoulders, buckled on the sword-belt, withdrew the keen blade of the *dah* from its scabbard and inspected it.

"Enough," he said. "Rasput Singh, tonight is to prove thy valor, with a kingdom at stake. Of your free will you go with me?"

"Aye, Sahib. See my sword! I have practiced the thrust and stroke that you taught me. Only let me meet the usurper face to face, and I will show him I am a man."

Stark laughed and clapped the prince upon the shoulder. "Let us go, then," he said.

Without another word the two strode out into the darkness, making toward the bridge of boats that spanned the Ganges, three miles away.

ON the north side of the river all was silence, but as they progressed, the two could hear the faint shouts of the votaries gathered in the temples along the southern shore, and these grew louder as they drew near the bridge.

A dull and distant clamor, as if all Jodhpur had assembled to drain the dregs of fanaticism. High on the hill the smoldering embers of the cantonment glowed faintly.

The bridge was almost deserted, save for an occasional passenger, some man of low caste, scavenger or offal-gatherer, who shrank away from the two as they traversed it. And now Stark and the young prince were on the south shore, and treading the mazes of narrow streets that extended down toward the river.

The bluffs loomed up above them, and on top of them, the Palace, almost dark and looking as if deserted. From the Temple of All the Gods, and from the Jain temple adjacent, the shrieks of the votaries filled the air with deafening sound.

"Where go we, Sahib?" inquired the little prince.

"Into the Palace first, by a hidden way. Wouldst thou see the mother of him who bore thee?"

"Sahib, shall I see her? It is so long ago!" The boy's voice was tremulous with eagerness. "In truth, so long ago that I can hardly remember her."

"We shall see her," Stark answered. "Only, let not weakness of love make thee less of a man."

"It will make me more of a man," answered Rasput Singh. "For it is only through love one learns to hate, and only through hate one learns to love."

"Now who taught thee that, princeling?"
 "I have thought much in the forest, Sahib. I know that it is so."

They went on in silence again. Stark walked more slowly, examining every foot of the rock wall that towered above them, cutting off the Palace from view.

SECRETS of which the old Begum was the repository, age-old secrets of hidden ways connecting Palace with temples, traps, labyrinths, and blind passages—all these John Stark had learned and memorized. Threads of crevices in the rock walls, hewn out centuries before, quarries under the Palace where women had taken refuge in the stormy days of the Mogul Empire—Stark was the only person, except the Begum, who knew of these.

He stopped, felt the wall, moved on a pace or two, and found the opening he sought.

"Now hold me," he said to Rasput Singh. "This way is treacherous, and a false step may lead to disaster."

For fifty yards he pursued an upward course. Then the rushing of a stream was heard. There came a faint glimmer of moonlight. Stark stopped. The two were standing on the brink of a subterranean rivulet, foaming down into the Ganges, which was visible through an arched tunnel. In the old days many a harem favorite or prisoner of state had passed that way to death.

They skirted the stream, moved upward over steps roughly hewn in the rock, Stark with hands outstretched in front of him, until he found the door he sought. Everything now depended on whether the Begum had opened it, as he had instructed her. But it gave, and the two found themselves on a stairway, with dripping rock walls on either side of them.

Two flights and there appeared the glimmer of a butter-lamp upon a wall. A door appeared. Stark felt it. It was locked. He pulled the tiny cord that protruded from the wall and waited.

A minute passed, then the door slowly opened. On the other side was a small, unfurnished chamber. A single figure stood in it, a shrouded woman's figure.

John Stark went forward. "Highness," he said, saluting, "here is your eaglet, grown to man's estate, and strong and well again. But first, the English prisoners. And the American girl. Are they well?"

"The English are safe in the vaults beneath. The girl—you know what her fate is to be, Stark Sahib. Now let me see my grandson."

She moved toward the boy, threw back her veils. "Why, it is a child yet!" she cried. "Dost thou remember thy father's mother, Rasput Singh?"

She caught him in her arms and strained him to her. John Stark looked away.

He waited till the prince addressed him: "Stark Sahib, I am ready now to follow you to the seven hells of the Buddha, if such there be," he said.

"Not now," said Stark. "Her Highness, your grandmother, will instruct you. For a little while we part: but tonight we meet again. Highness, you sent your messenger to the English General with my instructions?" he asked the Begum.

"Twenty-four hours ago he slipped out of the Palace during the rioting," replied the old lady, veiling her face partly as she turned to speak. "Three red rockets from the Palace roof between now and dawn will mean success. Ah, you are a man, Sahib, to have brought my child's child back to me!"

Stark bowed and backed out of the room.

CHAPTER NINE

THE REINCARNATED GODDESS



AS the night wore on, the yells of the multitude in the courts of the Temple of All the Gods had grown wilder. A seething mass of humanity, consisting of all the castes, surged up to the great bronze gates, awaiting the miracle that was to be proof visible to them that the goddess had taken visible form.

Among these moved many Jains, who had filtered into their midst from the Jain temple adjacent. These men, wearing no caste-mark, passed for the most part unrecognized by the orthodox.

Inside the Temple, behind a great cur-

tain that shielded the sacred shrine, Leila sat like a stone figure. The drug that had been administered to her in the sherbet had completely deprived her of power of speech or movement, yet she could hear the incessant chanting of the priests beyond the curtain, in the great interior presided over by the hideous images of the Hindu gods, could see the dim light of the butter-lamps that came through. She could hear the frantic shouting of the mobs in the courts, and the accents of Bhopra Lal, who stood beside her with the aged priest.

"You do not need to worry about your aunt, Miss Chadwick," Bhopra Lal was saying. "Last night her body was quietly committed to the fire, and the handful of dust that remained was scattered to the air. But this the ignorant do not know—they know only that she has passed into a death-like swoon, from which she will awake again, young and beautiful, because she can never die.

"You, Miss Chadwick, will be recognized instantly as your aunt, returned to youth.

"Already all the central Provinces are in revolt, and the British troops are hemmed into their fortresses. All the native troops have deserted them. So do not cherish any deluded hopes of escaping.

"As soon as the multitude has seen you, you will take your aunt's place as the holy woman of the Temple, and will also become the bride of His Highness, the Jam. A good fate, Miss Chadwick. Take what the gods have sent you thankfully."

Leila, listening with unmoved countenance, felt her whole being thrill with horror. Yet in the midst of this, she became aware of something that revived a tiny flicker of hope in her. *She could move her toes in her sandals!* The effects of the powerful, secret drug were already beginning to wear off. She could move the tips of her fingers also, under the long silken sleeves.

Would she regain her voice and be able to cry out to the mob that this was all deception, and if she did, would any hear or understand? Would this not be the signal for her own immediate death?

But better than fall into the Jam's hands!

AT the point where the secret tunnel opened into the passage between the *senana* and the Temple, at what looked like the merest cleft in the dark wall of rock, John Stark was crouching. He had washed the caste-mark from his forehead in the subterranean stream, had stripped off cloak and tunic, and put on the uniform of an English army officer, which—since it was his business to forget nothing—he had concealed in the tunnel two days before.

Apprised of the plot against Leila, by the Begum, to whom an inmate of the *senana* had babbled secrets learned from the lips of the Jam, Stark had made all his preparations for the denouement.

Behind him lurked one of the three girls whom Leila had seen in the Begum's apartment, a shadow, like himself, whom Stark had bidden follow him.

An hour had passed when Stark heard the trampling of footsteps in the corridor beyond the cleft, which was of modern construction, wide and well lighted. He saw the Jam appear, accompanied by one of his officers.

Cruel, sinister, furtive, and smiling now at the thought of the rôle he had to play, the Jam of Jodhpur was walking all unknowing to his death.

Stark heard him speak to his officer, saw the latter salute and stand on guard, while the Jam passed on toward the Temple.

Instantly Stark had slipped between the edges of the cleft. At the slight sound the Indian turned, and saw him—an English officer, but wearing, in place of a cavalry sword, one of the long swords of the Jains. And the sword was already halfway out of John Stark's scabbard.

There were people who said that John Stark's smile could be more terrible than his laughter. Such a smile played about his grim mouth now.

"Nay, we must all meet death, friend," he said, "so play the man, and do not scream like a girl, when this can avail you nothing. Draw your sword!"

The officer was of one of the bravest, one of the Jam's own bodyguard. For a moment he hesitated whether to fight or scream or fly; then, slashing his sword out of its scabbard, he leaped forward.

And John Stark's sword, whirling in an arc from wall to wall of the corridor, struck the head from the shoulders, and sent it bouncing along the ground, while the trunk, upright a moment longer, dropped in a heap at Stark's feet.

"Ah-eeya!" came from the crevice behind him. "That was a mighty stroke, Sahib!"

"Go back now, girl, and tell Her Highness that the way is clear as far as the shrine," said Stark.

And, holding the bloodstained sword in his hand, he made his way along the corridor in the wake of the Jam. An old priest stood as if on guard at the rear entrance to the shrine. At Stark's appearance he shrank back in terror. Stark motioned to him to open the door, but then he saw that it was unlocked.

He entered.

HE could hear voices, but for a moment he could see nothing. Then he realized that the voices were of two men, and came from a little anteroom whose door was almost closed. Neither of them could see him.

Now he could see Leila, wearing her tiara, and seated on her throne behind the altar, with the heavy curtain in front of her. Bending over her, with a leer upon his swarthy face, was the Jam.

The Jam turned suddenly and grew aware of Stark's presence. Perhaps he did not recognize him for who Stark was, but the sight of the English uniform seemed to fill him with terror.

He uttered a cry, put his hand to his side, and realized that he had no sword.

"Your Highness, I arrest you in the name of the Indian Government, for treason against the British Raj," said Stark.

With a louder cry the Jam reeled against the curtains. They parted, and he disappeared inside the Temple. Stark hesitated an instant, then he gathered Leila in his arms. To save her was all-important, but, before he could carry her out through the rear, the door of the small anteroom opened, and Stark saw Bhopra Lal and the old priest staring at him as if petrified.

At the same moment the clanging of the

bells ended in a wild clash of metal. The bronze gates of the Temple opened, and the mob rushed in. Stark could hear the Jam shouting violently in their midst.

The curtains parted, showing Stark holding Leila, and Bhopra Lal and the priest, convulsed with terror, crouching behind the shrine, Bhopra snarling like a wild beast.

Stark set Leila down. She tottered, tried to walk, and collapsed upon the floor behind the throne, her face, which was turned downward, hidden from the view of the multitude.

Stark felt a thudding shock between the shoulders. He saw the smoking revolver in Bhopra Lal's hands, and realized that he had been hit. He staggered toward the wall, drew his sword, and stood there at bay, while Bhopra fled from the sight of the naked steel.

For a moment stupefaction reigned among the crowd. Then the Jam's voice rang out:

"It is one of the accursed Feringhees, who has escaped. Five thousand rupees to the first man who kills him!"

He leaped forward, waving his sword. Stark could see that he was taking precious care to keep out of the reach of his own. Like a panther, the Jam crouched, watching, trying to discern how seriously Stark was wounded.

BEHIND him was the dark mob, as yet too paralyzed with astonishment to take in the situation. The light of the great, swinging butter-lamp, which shone on the Jam's face, showed Stark the sudden change of sentiment that had taken place in him.

Probably the Jam recognized Stark now, and had decided that his own prestige required that he himself should slay this wounded man. He was coming nearer, nearer, and not a sound could be heard but the shuffling of his feet.

Then suddenly out of the entrance burst the boyish figure of Rasput Singh, sword in hand, and behind him Stark saw the Begum. So the old woman had had the courage, after all, to stake everything upon her grandson's bid for his throne!

With a bound, the boy was between Stark and his adversary, with sword pointed at the Jam's throat.

"Ah, traitor, usurper, you know me now?" he cried. "Oh my people, I am Rasput Singh, the rightful Prince of Jodhpur!"

With features convulsed with rage, the Jam rushed at his youthful kinsman, his sword describing a mighty sweep.

Stark's faith was not misplaced. Agile as a cat, the young prince leaped aside, while the Jam's sword, reaching the end of its sweep, caught in the folds of the curtain. And, while he disengaged it, Rasput Singh stood still. That was a part of the spirit of fair play that Stark had taught him.

Looking at the boy's face, Stark knew that he could not fail.

Again the blades clashed, and again. Then, with the speed and litheness of a snake, the boy's sword thrust inside the other's guard and stood out a handbreadth behind his body.

Shrieking, the ruler of Jodhpur dropped to the Temple floor.

SILENCE still, for there was something in the face of the young prince that looked, to the superstitious multitude, like the light that is said to glow from the face of Krishna, the Creator.

"I am your Prince, as you all know, my people," cried Rasput Singh. "This man, my uncle, was a usurper!"

The old Begum was standing at his side. "This is your Prince, my grandson, O my people," she cried. And she did what no woman of her house had ever done before, for she threw back her veil, disclosing her splendid, regal features for all to see.

Then a dull muttering began. "The Goddess! Show us the incarnation of the never-dying one!" cried a man. And the crowd swayed to and fro, irresolute, fascinated, swept by emotions that might be turned in any channel at any instant.

A man leaped forward from their midst, and Stark, reeling from his wound, and faint from loss of blood, recognized Bhopra Lal.

"The Feringhee and the impostor have killed our Prince!" he cried. "Kill them, people of Jodhpur! See, they have struck down the goddess at her own altar!"

Stark staggered forward. "Jains, to your prince's rescue!" he cried, in a voice that rang through the Temple. And instantly Bhopra Lal was down, with six inches of good Jain steel through his heart.

OUTSIDE, the yelling was taken up, as more and more of the Jains came hurrying from the precincts of their Temple, driving the Hindus before them.

"Sahib, we win, we win!" cried the Rasput Singh exultantly. "But blood is flowing from you—you are wounded!"

Stark hardly heard. He was looking at Leila, who lay propped up against the wall behind the shrine. He knew that she was safe now, and an emotion was stirring in him that he had not felt in many a day. She had battled so courageously at his side in the Ganges water, she had been so fine, so thoroughbred!

He turned. "The Feringhee prisoners?" he asked quickly.

"They are all safe, Stark Sahib. Even now they rest in the Palace, under the care of those of my own people whom you sent to help me. But your wound — your wound!" answered the Begum.

And, though she was old, since this was a man who spoke to her, she veiled her face again.

"It is well, Highness. You will direct that the three red rockets be discharged from the Palace roof, else the guns of the advancing English will open upon the town tonight. Now all will be well. Nay, eaglet, think not of me—"

But Stark realized how lonely his life had been, how lonely it must be during the short term of his remaining service in India, and afterward, in his own chill England—unless. . . .

"Nay, I need no help," he said, to the group about him. "But carry the Mem-Sahib carefully to the Palace, and let a doctor be summoned."

When he had slept, he thought, he would see Leila again.

(The End)



"Get out of this! We must get out of this!" The girl was tugging at Bannister's arm. (Page 92.)

CASTANETS AND MALLETS

By

Charles B. Parmer

CHAPTER ONE

FORGOTTEN PORTS



HE captain shook his head. "Trouble ashore," he said crisply. "Better stay on board, Mr. Bannister." He glanced sharply at the man who had climbed to the freighter's bridge, asking to be rowed to the dock. "And this is a forgotten port," he continued. "No radio here, no consul. Nothing but the sweepings of South America; I'd never make this port but for engine-room trouble.

"The last radio from Rio said that Don Esteban was gathering forces, back in the hills. That means trouble. He may swoop down any time—maybe tonight."

"Nonsense!" Bannister objected. "I speak Spanish as well as a native, and I can take care of myself. I'm fed up with ship's tack. Send me ashore for a couple of hours—"

"We may leave any minute," the master broke in with another objection. "The very second the chief gets his condensers working."

Hugh Bannister smiled. "I've got you there," he said. "I've just been in the engine room. The chief says it may be dawn

before he's ready to answer full speed ahead."

The captain was silent a moment. He didn't want to offend this chap, for Bannister represented a wealthy New Yorker, who was shipping a cargo of polo ponies to Rio in his care: ponies that were insured for more than all the rest of the cargo. But he didn't like this business of dropping a boat for his lone passenger.

"Of course, if you must go," the mariner said with hesitation, "I can send you ashore for half an hour or so. But I advise against it."

Bannister removed his cap, let the light breeze blow through his curly brown hair. Ashore the lights of the little port blinked and beckoned. Behind the town, and rising like the backdrop of a theater scene, was an irregular, bluish mass, which shaded into the dying crimson of the sky. That was the hill range, which reached almost to the shore line.

"Think I'll chance it, sir," he said.

"You know my sailing orders?" the master asked. "I've positive orders not to lose a second's time—and we're already behind schedule. But if you must go, I'll drop a boat for you; and thirty minutes before I raise anchor I'll blow the whistle. Send

the boat back to the dock. But if you're not there, Mr. Bannister—"

"If I'm not there, make it full speed ahead," Bannister answered. "But I'll be there, unless—" He checked himself. He had a vague premonition—a hunch he'd call it—that there'd be a bit of excitement on shore tonight. He felt the need of it. For two weeks he had been cooped on this tiresome old freighter, while wallowing down to Rio. He'd had his fill of freighter-life. If he hadn't been broke—on his uppers, really—he'd never have taken the assignment. Not even for the chance to play polo with the finest players in Brazil.

"All right, let's go," he said quickly, as he started down the bridge ladder.

"Quartermaster!" the captain called.

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"Lower boat number one, starboard side. Take Mr. Bannister ashore."

"Yes, sir."

The captain went back into the chart-room, shaking his head. He didn't like this business at all, and he swore to himself that if young Bannister didn't answer the whistle, didn't return in time, well, it would be too bad. He'd have to leave him on the beach. He wanted to please him, but he feared the wrath of his marine superintendent back in New York.

Every hour's delay meant a loss of dollars, many dollars. Dollars were worth more to the line than the good will of a swanky young polo player.

Bannister climbed into boat number one. Four a. b.'s unlashed the davits, stepped in, then swung it overside.

"Smartly, now," the quartermaster called.

Down, down the boat went, until it splashed against the surface of the smooth harbor water. The quartermaster shipped the tiller and called:

"Heave ho, lads!"

With long, sweeping strokes the boat started for shore.

The quartermaster munched on his cud and chuckled to himself.

"What's funny?" Bannister asked.

"I likes the way you—you put salt on the old man," the heavy-set mariner answered out of the corner of his mouth. "Don't blame you for wantin' to go ashore.

This here port—well—" He broke off, and even in the deepening dusk Hugh Bannister could see the light of recollection coming into his rheumy eyes.

"This here port, I made it twenty—no, twenty-two year ago. First time. Been back twice. Last time in '29. Ain't changed a-tall. Pretty lively," he finished, as he grinned at the youngster. Then he asked as he leaned for an instant on the tiller: "Ever make this here port yourself, sir?"

"Never. But I know Rio and Buenos Ayres."

"This here be a combination of the hell and the heaven of all South Americy," the old man went on. "Got the prettiest cathedral in the world, the meanest dogs—hundreds of curs—the wickedest women, and the prettiest, too.

"Old Don Esteban, he's back there in the hills somewhere. He's on the other side of politics in this here republic, you know. Seems he wants to seize the town, make it a great seaport, like Rio. And I hear tell—"

He broke off to give a sharp command to his crew. Then: "I hear tell there's gold somewhere abouts—there's some wild country, other side of that range; lot of streams. Them Yaqui Indians do placer mining, then trade for supplies out on the plains. Old Esteban, he's got gold. All he needs is this here seaport."

As the boat eased to the dock, the quartermaster leaned forward and spoke in a half whisper:

"Know where to go, sir?"

Bannister shook his head. "I just want to get my land legs back again."

The quartermaster grunted. "Well, sir, you can stretch 'em back and forth on this here dock. Nobody in sight to interfere. Still and all, if I was as young as you, and had shore leave—" He broke off as though fearful to say more.

"You'd do what?" Bannister prompted him.

"I'd go to La Bilbana, that's what I'd do."

"La Bilbana? What's that?" Bannister asked.

"The swellest café this side of Mar-seilles," the quartermaster answered, as he

took a plug of rough cut from his pocket.

"Been here—well, I 'spect it was here when Cortez first cut up in these here parts," he explained. "On t'other side of the square. Big place—music, dancing. The vaqueros come across the plains and over the hills just to—to go to La Bilbana.

"Liquor? Plenty of it. And music. Women. And *more* women. It's a—a little hell," he finished.

"Thanks. Think I'll go to—hell!" Bannister said with a laugh, as he climbed to the dock.

CHAPTER TWO

WHISPER BEHIND THE FAN

STORKEEPERS were putting up window shutters and removing door handles as Bannister walked down the main street leading to the square. And curs—seemingly scores of them—followed him, snapped at his heels.

Here and there he heard a burst of laughter as a café door opened a moment, cutting the dusk with a sheath of light. A group of roistering seamen, arms about one another, swung past him, singing lustily.

Twice he passed women—heavy, oldish women, with burdens on their head. Once, twice he heard a child cry as he walked under an opened window. And more than once, from the shadows, a woman called.

At last the street turned and opened on the square. Across the way Bannister saw a long, low adobe building, its windows brilliant with light. And he heard snatches of a tango. In front a score of horses were tethered. That would be La Bilbana. He quickened his steps.

As he reached the door, a beggar shamed out of the shadows, hand outstretched, voice whining for alms.

Bannister flipped a piece of silver to him. The mendicant caught it and called in unctuous tones, "*Muchas gracias, Señor.*"

Then he flung open the door and stepped into—the quartermaster's "hell."

A gorgeous, enticing place it was. A long, low room, with red cushioned seats against the walls, facing tables. A balcony at the far end, on which an orchestra

played. And potted palms, here, there—half concealing tables at which sat vaqueros with their señoritas—vaqueros in fiesta garb, who had ridden from the plains and over the hills for a night in La Bilbana.

As he swung the door behind him and stood framed against it, Bannister made a living picture: a smiling youth in whites, limned against the darkened doorway; a smiling, blue-eyed and curly-haired youth who seemed to have stepped from the movies of the Northland.

Someone stepped forward, a muscular old chap in bell-bottomed trousers and tight-fitting waist, gold-embroidered. In a glance he took in the visitor's nationality.

"Ah, Señor Americano!" He bowed low, glanced around, and seeing a vacant table midway down the room, led the way to it. Smilingly he drew it out, so Hugh Bannister could sit behind it, on the red cushions, against the wall.

For an instant he looked Bannister straight in the eyes. The smile left his face. Bannister felt that the man, for some reason unknown to him, wished to say something—something in private. Once, twice, he nodded, shook his head as if he knew Bannister understood the meaning. Then he left.

A waiter approached with an unasked aperitif, and with a flourish put it in front of Bannister. Something sweetish and syrupy—but very delightful.

As he sipped it, the orchestra burst into a tango. From behind the palms came a girl—a girl in flowing gown and long mantilla. In one hand she held a fan; in the other a castanet. She flashed her fan open, clicked the castanet, and went into a dance.

As she swayed to the dance floor, all lights were lowered; then a spotlight cast a crimson ray that enveloped her lithe body. Faster, faster she danced—

A waiter, unbidden, took a bottle from a wet napkin, pulled the cork, filled a glass and set it in front of Bannister, taking for granted that he would order wine.

As the music played and the dancer swayed, he lifted the glass to his lips. Bubbling, sparkling wine! The dancer passed him. Bannister saw her clearly. She was young—and beautiful. Eyes like great

glowing black pearls were turned on him: eyes protected by long, drooping lashes.

She swept past.

Fascinated, he watched her as she moved down the floor, waving her fan, clicking her castanet. Now she was pirouetting, circling back toward him, that red flame still enveloping her. Once more she passed him, quite closely—so closely that he heard the swish of silken garments, breathed the scent of columbine.

For an instant she looked at him again. Her lips moved. She spoke—one word. He could not catch it. She danced on. Now the music played softly, and from across the square came the tolling of a cathedral bell.

Once more the dancer turned and again she swayed toward him. Intoxicated by her beauty, the grace of her movements, Bannister raised his glass to her as she approached.

The orchestra burst into crescendo, and the music ended with a blare of trumpets, a crash of cymbals. There was a stamping of feet, a beating of hands together.

She gave no heed to the applause. Her back turned to all others, she stepped toward Bannister. He rose to his feet, still holding aloft the glass with the sparkling wine, and held it out toward her, smiling.

She took it, lifted it to her lips, hesitated an instant; and then, as the applause continued, turned, held the glass out, then high, as if toasting all. There were shouts, cries.

For a second she held that pose, then turned once more toward the American. Once more she smiled on him. Now she was lowering the glass to her lips, tasting its nectar. Now she was giving it back, for him to drink to the lees.

As he took the glass, she fitted her fan open, held it over her mouth—and spoke. Quite distinctly he heard—not words of thanks, but the sharply spoken, "*Cuidado!*"

What was this? She was telling him, beware—yet she was smiling. Beware of what?

The orchestra was playing again. She clicked the castanet and once more went into her dance. Then one last time she came by his table. He was still standing.

This time she danced straight to his table, smiled, spread open the fan, leaned forward as if inviting a caress—and whispered:

"*Ahi hay peligro!*"

She swept away before he could fathom the meaning of her warning—there is danger!

CHAPTER THREE

THE VAQUERO FIGHTS

THE music ceased. The girl disappeared behind palms. An attentive waiter was filling Bannister's glass again. As he raised it to his lips and started to drink, he hesitated, lowered the glass.

Across the room were a group of vaqueros, hard-faced and swarthy men in fiesta garb. One, the youngest of the group, with cross-scars on his right cheek, was glaring at Bannister. With elbows on table he stared straight at the youngster, scowled—then whispered to the others.

One vaquero leaned over, touched him on the shoulder, and though Bannister could not hear the words, the man's bantering tone was quite plain. The younger one made a sharp reply. Then he stood up, walked to the end of the room, and in a voice the entire café could hear, called: "*Sefiorita!*"

The girl came from behind the palms. The vaquero seized one of her wrists, jerked her out on the dance floor, said something to her. She broke his grip, faced him an instant.

"No—no!"

Bannister heard her words clearly.

Again the vaquero grasped her wrist. She tore loose and in loud tones called: "*Por los santos lo juro!*"

What was it, Bannister asked himself, that she was swearing by the saints?

Now both were looking at him. The man was frowning; but a ripple of a smile spread over the girl's face.

Again the vaquero turned on her and said something soft and low—and venomous. The girl's head flew back, color mounted to her face. Her arms swung out. The heavy folded fan crashed against his cheek. She turned on heel and left him. The

crowd roared with laughter at the man's discomfiture.

For an instant he stood hesitant. Then, as the music began playing ever so softly, he strode across the floor, his spurs jingling a barbaric tattoo. As he approached, Bannister raised his glass nonchalantly.

"Dog of an Americano!" the man shouted.

Bannister got to his feet, still holding the glass. In a flash the man's arm shot out, knocked the glass from Bannister's hand. It tinkled to bits on the stone floor. For a split second the American stood immobile.

"Dog!" the vaquero repeated contemptuously.

Bannister's right fist went straight to the man's chin. He teetered on his feet, then lunged forward. Bannister threw the table against him, leaped over it. They went down together, the American on top. The place went into an uproar.

Writhing and fighting like a cornered wildcat, the vaquero was gouging Bannister's right eye, as the American's hands closed on the man's throat.

Bannister threw his head back. His grip weakened. The vaquero's knee struck, with powerful force, against his stomach. The American gasped. The vaquero broke his hold. Bannister rolled over and leaped to his feet.

"Dog of ten thousand dogs!" the vaquero shouted, lunging at him again.

But now half a dozen men leaped between them. They were pulled apart. The burly, middle-aged man, who had welcomed him, now had thrown his arms around Bannister, pinioning him.

"Not now, Señor," he whispered in Bannister's ear, "the time has not come. Later."

The other side of the room was held back by café attendants. The vaquero was cursing and waving an unsheathed knife in the air. Someone struck the weapon from his hand. It clattered to the floor.

"Now, Señor, rest a while," Bannister's unknown friend was whispering again. "Rest and drink. You have many friends here. Pablo Felipe," glancing across at the angry vaquero, "does no harm to you in La Bilbana tonight. I see to it."

BANNISTER sat down. Odd that he, a stranger, should have a host of unknown friends here. He was a stranger to them, yet half the café had taken his side.

The music, which had stopped during the brief mêlée, now was playing again. Another bottle of wine, wrapped in a damp napkin, was placed before the American.

"With my own hands, Señor," Bannister's new friend announced, "I, Juan Pedro y Monterey, open for you."

The old fellow pulled the cork, filled the glass and gave it to Bannister. There were shouts, and a score of glasses were lifted toward him, as if the crowd was drinking his health.

Bannister saw that no glass remained on table, save those in front of the little group of vaqueros opposite.

"Ah, Señorita Carlotta, she dances again for you, Señor Americano," Juan Pedro announced.

She was coming out again, this time all smiles for Bannister alone. Gliding toward him, she held her arms out enticingly. He rose, met her. Speaking in purest Castilian, she whispered, as they swayed together, "I am so glad you have come, Señor Americano. I knew you would not fail me. It was in the stars! The stars said you would come and defend me."

She tossed her head back, then smiled into his eyes.

"You dance divinely," Bannister murmured.

"Yes?" She raised her eyebrows. "Then let us dance the Dance of Life together. Shall we?"

Intoxicated by the grace of her movements, the loveliness of her being and that flashing smile—a smile such as he had never known before—he answered:

"I shall dance always with you."

"Ah!" she replied, as they circled the palms at the far end of the room. "But you, Señor," very slowly she spoke the words, "*es usted muy bravo!*"

He felt himself flushing at the compliment.

"Very brave?" he asked. "No, not that, Señorita; but you dared face Pablo Felipe, and he—"

"But I fear for you, my friend."

"Why?" he asked.

"You know why," she answered softly. "Need I tell you? But you will not desert me. Will you? You will stay by me. Will you not, Señor Americano?"

Once more she smiled into his eyes.

"Ah, this is life, *preciosa mia!*"

Now he was guiding her down the floor.

"Ah, behold!" she murmured, looking over his shoulder. "Pablo Felipe, he and his followers, they have gone. It is just as well. They were not welcome in La Bilbana tonight, with you here. And, Señor—" she dropped her voice so low that he scarcely heard it above the music—"tonight the moon rides high in the sky. Be there with me. Behind the cathedral at midnight."

As he raised his eyes, she repeated the words, "*Detras de la catedral a media noche.*"

The music ceased. The crowd burst into applause. Señorita Carlotta bowed right and left. Then, taking Hugh Bannister's hand, she bowed to him. She straightened, tapped him on the shoulder with her fan, and whispered:

"Remember—midnight, my friend."

She turned, waving her fan at the throng, ran across the floor and disappeared behind the palms. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

ON THE BEACH

WHAT imbrogio was this he had stumbled into? Bannister asked himself as he drank another glass of sparkling wine. There was something afoot, but what it was, was beyond his comprehension.

He, a stranger, saunters into a café in South America. He is greeted by the proprietor as though he were a long-awaited friend. A dancer—the most glorious, the most beautiful dancer he had ever seen—smiles into his eyes; and then warns him of some hidden danger.

A moment later a plainsman is accusing the girl of something—and he and Bannister fight. The crowd, strangely enough, takes his side. Then the lovely Señorita

Carlotta goes into his arms. And as they dance, Pablo Felipe—whoever he may be—slinks away with his group. Then that lovely girl asks a meeting with him at midnight behind the cathedral.

No matter what it was, Bannister swore to himself, he'd see it through. There was some devilry afoot; but, he mused, beautiful devilry!

For two weeks he had been cooped on a musty, dirty freighter, a freighter that carried not a single woman. And now he had stepped into the arms of the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. That freighter—he wondered when those repairs would be completed. He hoped never. He leaned back. Admiring glances were cast toward him. He was liked. Trouble afoot? That was what the old ship's master said. Bannister laughed. Nothing save ice water ran in that old boy's veins now. *Trouble?* He welcomed it, if the lovely Carlotta was by his side. . . .

AN old man—so old the sins of the ages seemed etched in his face—stood musing by a candle on a mantelpiece in an adobe house, facing a back street behind the cathedral. At last he turned, stepped to a doorway, parted the curtains, and called:

"Are you ready, my little one?"

From the dark recesses came the answer, "In one moment, my friend."

He returned to the mantel. A moment later the curtains parted. Señorita Carlotta stepped forward, then smiled. The old man's eyes widened.

"Ah!" he breathed. "If I were young once again!"

"It would do you no good," she said lightly. "My heart is not yet for sale; only this." She tapped her forehead.

He gazed at the high Castilian head-dress; the mantilla that draped over the lower portion of her face, the dark silken gown she wore; the crimson-lined cloak thrown so jauntily around her shoulders. He glanced, too, at those twinkling, dancing feet incased in silver slippers.

"So!" he murmured, in admiration. "You go forth to entice the Señor Americano, eh?"

"Not to entice," she retorted, her face sobering. "Already he is mine. Tonight in La Bilbana he flooded Pablo Felipe. I did not expect him so soon. Word was that he would not come before midnight."

"How did you know him?" the old one inquired.

"That was easy," she answered. "Did not Don Esteban send word that a Señor Americano—and a very brave one—would come to the port tonight? True, he was not expected till midnight; but he came. The only Americano in the place. How could I miss him?"

"Are you certain he will join us?" the old one asked.

"Leave that to me," she retorted. "Is he not a soldier of fortune?"

"Ah, you snare him."

Her face sobered. "My friend, I do not like this. I do not like it at all," she said slowly.

"What's this?" he demanded, straightening his aged form and glaring at her.

"He is so nice, so chivalrous—like a grandee of old Spain. I do not like the idea of sending him to certain death."

"Death, bah!" the man snorted. "If he is as brave as you say he is, he can fight his way through. But wait." He took her hand in his claws, pressed it suddenly.

"Oh!" She jerked loose.

"Wait," he told her. "The heart is not to enter this, Señorita Carlotta—nothing save the head. Understand?"

Her manner changed. "Have I ever failed yet?" She flashed a smile at him.

"Ah, I knew you would see reason!" He smirked at her. "But now—harken!"

They heard the tolling of the cathedral bell. It was midnight.

"And now you, my little one, go forth for the honor of Don Esteban."

FOR a long while Hugh Bannister had sat in the café. Soon he would sally forth—where was it? Ah, yes, behind the cathedral at midnight, to meet the lovely Carlotta.

Something, he knew not what, was afoot—something glamorous and glorious. He would see it through. But wait—he remembered his duty.

Down in the harbor lay a rusty freighter with a precious cargo of polo ponies aboard. He was to deliver those safely in Rio. Confound the luck; he'd have to return to the ship! No matter what glamorous adventure lay behind the cathedral, he could not attend. He had given his word in New York that he would deliver those ponies, and deliver them he would.

He arose and called for his check. He must return to the dock; no doubt those repairs were made by now. A few moments ago he thought he heard a hoarse whistle. In fact, he had heard the whistle; but for the moment, reveling in dreams of what might be behind the cathedral, he had ignored it. Now he had to go.

"My check," he demanded crisply, in Spanish.

Old Juan Pedro stepped to his table. "My friend, you're the guest of Juan Pedro y Monterez tonight. There can be no payment." He smiled at the American, and then he added in an undertone as if he understood all, "And God go with you tonight, Señor Americano."

Once out of the café, Bannister felt the shock of the clean night air. At brisk pace he crossed the square. There to the right was the cathedral, and behind it—he glanced at his wrist-watch; it was almost midnight—there would be Señorita Carlotta.

Confound duty! He stopped, faced the right—then thought better of it. No, that was one adventure he'd never have, save in dreams. He'd have to carry on.

Quickening his pace, he went down the main street. He turned the corner just as the cathedral bell sounded midnight. Below him, now in full view, lay the harbor. No ship lay there! The harbor was deserted. Far off on the horizon he saw the faint flicker of lights. Yes, a ship—his ship—beating southward to Rio. He was left on the beach.

Disgustedly he swore at himself. Swore at the captain who had not given him an extra half hour. Then he had to admit it was his own fault. He had heard that warning whistle.

This was more serious than he thought. There was no radio in this little seaport.

No American Consul. And he had only a few dollars in his pocket.

He was stranded—left flat on the beach, far from his own kind. It would take him days to work down the coast to the nearest city, where he could radio for funds. But no, he couldn't well do that. He couldn't explain missing his ship. That was the unpardonable sin.

For a moment he stood immobile, gazing at those fast receding lights. Down in Rio—the Paris of the western world—they were waiting for those polo ponies. Great matches were to be played. He was scheduled to play in them. He laughed. What did it matter? He was young. There would be other days and other games. But there would never be another night!

He turned around and, with brisk and eager steps, started walking toward the cathedral. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

MOONLIGHT RENDEZVOUS

AS he crossed the square, he saw that horses no longer were tethered in front of La Bilbana. Those must have been Pablo Felipe's horses—Pablo Felipe, whoever and whatever he was.

Lights were still burning in the café, but no longer was there music. As he approached the shadow of the cathedral, he saw the lights blink out. Now the town seemed in slumber.

The cathedral itself stood apart from all other structures. A remains of the early Spanish conquests. Built in the days when Spanish galleons brought hidalgos in steel breastplates across the seas, to wrest golden treasure from the simple-minded Indians.

He walked around to the right of the structure. Passed the nave, then the transept. In the rear was a huge moonlight shadow cast by a flying buttress. As he walked slowly around its outer edge, he saw a figure standing out in the gloom. The figure of a trim and straight girl with high headdress and mantilla over face.

He stopped. Stepping forward till she was only a few feet from him, he heard her pure Castilian tones:

"La luna esta hermosa esta noche."

It was the voice of the dancer. She was looking at him. Then she raised her hand to the golden moon in a cloud-flecked sky.

Impulsively he stepped forward, took that hand, pressed it to his lips.

"The moon is beautiful," he repeated, "and so are you, my dear," he finished, releasing her hand.

"You are very gallant—and you are on time," she whispered. "Come, shall we go?"

She was raising her right arm. He took it in his left.

"We go not far, my friend," she explained, "and should there be trouble, there are horses saddled—one for you and one for me—waiting to carry us into the hills."

She directed their footsteps down a lane. Passed a line of adobe huts, now slumbering in the night. They turned, walked under a spreading eucalyptus tree. Before them was a square adobe house. Softly she let the knocker fall. There was a rattle of chains within. The drawing of a heavy bolt and a voice called:

"Who's there?"

"It is I, Señorita Carlotta," she answered softly, "and the Señor Americano."

Another bolt was drawn. Then the barrier swung open.

"Enter," a voice called from the gloom.

They stepped inside, the door closed behind them. In the rays of one candle, Hugh Bannister saw they were in a square room—a room of white-painted, plaster walls. A green tile flooring. A huge fireplace, now empty. A long table in the center, three chairs grouped around it.

Before him was standing the ugliest human being he had ever seen. A man with a skull bare of hair. Huge ears protruding fan-like from the head. A broken nose. Sullen lips. And a face scarred by many a knife blade. That face now grimaced with an attempt at a smile.

"Welcome, Señor Americano," he cackled. "My simple home, it is yours, and all it contains. But wait. You have been out in the night air. I shall bring something to ward off the chill. I shall be gone long; but not so long, for in my cellar there is a bottle I have kept all these years for the honor of such a visit. I go to seek it."

He passed through the portières.

With a graceful motion, the girl tossed her cape aside, dropped her mantilla. For a moment she stood facing him, arms half outstretched, lips parted in a smile, her eyelids slowly drooping.

"I knew you'd come," she whispered. "I knew you would join us."

Impulsively he stepped forward and took her hands. Again he raised them to his lips.

"You are beautiful," he murmured.

"Beautiful?" she asked. "If so, it is a beauty that shall be yours some day, Señor Americano, if only you come with us. We have right on our side, my friend—but we need more than that." Her voice dropped. "We need what you have; what is in your power to give us."

Intoxicated by the nearness of her, by the charm of her rare smile, he had asked nothing; but now, what was this? They needed what he had. And what was it that he had? Then the thought flashed into his head: he was mistaken for someone else, some American who was expected tonight in La Bilbana! Now he understood the cordiality of the café proprietor, the reason for the guests taking sides with him when he fought with the vaquero.

He recalled the captain's words and those of the old quartermaster, too. Don Esteban, rated as a brigand from beyond the hills, was planning a descent on the town. But who was this woman? Whom did she represent? And what of Pablo Felipe? Was he a loyalist? Or a minor chieftain, himself seeking to wrest power from Don Esteban?

HUGH BANNISTER knew his South America. More than once, when a revolutionary leader was about to make a *coup d'état*, a schism would appear in his ranks. Some jealous leader would part at the last moment, seeking all the power, the honor and the loot for himself. He guessed that Pablo Felipe was such, for he was a plainsman and not of the town. He saw she was looking at him questioningly.

"Just what do you want from me, Señorita?" he asked softly, as he dropped her hands.

"You know, my friend. We have expect-

ed you these many nights. And I swore to my uncle, Don Esteban, swore by the saints above that we should have your aid. You know, Señor Americano—do you not?—that our poor country has been oppressed by a worthless leader, a rascal who sips his drinks in the cafés of Paris while his agents grind taxes from our people. We have been preparing, we of the hills and the plains, for this revolution.

"We have the men, we have the horses, but we have not the guns. It was—how long ago was it, my friend?" she asked. "Ah, yes, it was a month ago that word came that you were running guns into our port, that you would arrive ahead of your vessel to make arrangements for landing them. And when that became known, the rascal, Pablo Felipe, picked a quarrel with my uncle. An excuse to break with him. He carried some of the men with him.

"Knowing that you were coming, my friend, I went into the town. Strange," she shook her head, "but no one knows me there except as Señorita Carlotta, the dancer, and yet—" she mused a moment—"and yet, I believe everyone knows who I am; but they say nothing. They are sympathetic. They are with us. The word was that you would repair to La Bilbana when you arrived. So night after night I have been dancing there, waiting for you. And night after night Pablo Felipe and his men have come there, too—drinking their wine and waiting. Now do you understand who I am and what I wish? I speak for Don Esteban."

She looked into his eyes, smiled again.

"Yes, I understand," he answered at last. But before he could reveal his true status to her, she spoke once more.

From her bodice she took a small silken bag, a bag that jingled.

"Behold." She held it up. "We have gold, we come prepared to pay, Señor Americano. Pablo Felipe, the vaquero, I do not think he would pay you, save in promises."

"And suppose," Hugh Bannister began, speaking slowly, "suppose I tell you that I will have none of your gold?"

"But, Señor," she protested, stepping back, "you would not be so foolish!"

"Suppose I told you I had no guns?"

"What's this?" she demanded, with a frown. "Surely you jest!"

"No, I have no *guñs*, *Señorita*."

She stepped forward, grasped his arm.

"What have you done with them? Have you already sold out to Pablo Felipe?"

He said nothing.

"Answer me!" she demanded. "Answer me, if you value your life!"

"What's this?" he asked quickly.

"Harken to me, *Señor*," she said quickly. "We know you have those guns. There are rifles, there are machine guns, there are thousands of rounds of ammunition. And here is gold for them. Let me warn you. I shouldn't tell you this—but if you do not sell to us—" she broke off, stared intently into his eyes.

"What do you mean?" he asked soberly.

"You mean you've betrayed us?" She stepped closer to him. "You mean you've sold out?"

There was a strange look on her face, an expression he could not fathom. He stepped back. His head struck against the wall. She pressed closer to him. Suddenly she swooped down. In a flash she raised her skirt, pulled a poniard from a garter, and now was pressing it against his heart. So quickly was it done, he could only gasp.

"Sold out, eh?" she mocked him.

"Turned traitor on Don Esteban and me, after I gave you warning!"

She was pressing closer against him. The knife blade was going into his coat.

"Wait!" he protested.

"Don't move! Don't raise your hands!" she warned. "If you do, I only lean forward, throw my weight against this knife, and it speeds into your heart!"

She was speaking the truth. Bannister felt the blood draining from his face.

"A mistake has been made," he said huskily, trying to control himself.

"Ah, yes, quite a serious mistake!" she jeered. "But never will the *Señor Americano* make the same mistake twice. So you sold out after you left the *café*, eh? When I was not watching you! If you only knew—I saved *you*, *Señor Americano*. They were going to seize you, carry you away, make you deliver your arms to them. But

they became afraid—afraid of me and my friends in the *café*. So, you sell out to them and then keep the appointment with me. Is that it?"

"That is the deadliest insult of all. Surely you knew I represented Don Esteban. Did you think I was a mere dancer?"

Now she was so close to him that he could feel her hot breath on his cheek, and still the poniard was pressing toward his heart.

"Please, let me explain," he said swiftly. "I am not the American you expected. I have no guns. I am merely an American who has been left stranded on the beach, by the freighter that lay in the harbor."

"Eh? What's this?" she demanded sharply, stepping back.

In that instant he seized her poniard arm, wrested the weapon from her. She gave a gasp. He threw it down. The steel clattered on the green tiles.

"Don't worry," he told her. "I don't fight women. But a mistake has been made and—" a half-smile played over his face—"if you don't mind, I'll go."

He started to turn for the door.

"Halt!"


He wheeled about.

Standing in front of the curtains was that evil-faced man. He was leveling a revolver at Hugh Bannister's head.

"So you're the wrong man, eh?" the old one demanded. "That is too bad, for, *Señor Americano*, you pay for your sins. You lie! You are the right man! You have sold out! You do not leave this house alive!"

CHAPTER SIX

KISS UNDER THE STARS

 HE old man stepped forward, still leveling the gun at Bannister. Odd how, when a man faces death, his mind flashes back, recalling, for a split second, a moment alien to the present.

Bannister was sitting on the steps of a mansion on Long Island. The moon was shining down and she—the girl that he loved—was saying no. She was shaking her head and smiled wistfully. "I wish it could be, Hugh, but it can't," she was saying in soft tones. "I like you. I believe I could

make myself love you; but not as long as you are what you are. Just another little playmate for the rich. The one for you to marry, Hugh, is a nice widow with a comfortable fortune. Someone who can keep you in polo ponies. I can't, for I am merely a little niece of the rich."

He was protesting, and she was answering him. "No, it can't be, Hugh. Some day, when you prove yourself, when you show you can make your own way." She was rising and now retreating into the house.

All that was in his yesterdays. Some morning, soon, she'd open the paper and she'd see a brief line: it would say something about one Hugh Bannister being shot in a revolutionary mixup in South America. Maybe it wouldn't be that glamourous. No, it would say café brawl. And she, the girl of his yesterday, would curl her lips in scorn.

No, he didn't want to die now. He was young, and life was stretching beautifully before him—was until he felt the poniard pointing over his heart; saw the pistol leveled at his eye.

"And now, Señor Americano—"

It was over in a flash!

Bannister was leaping forward. His body crashing against the old one, his hand knocking the pistol on high, the weapon exploding with deafening roar. They were crashing to the tile floor. The Spaniard lay still.

Bannister leaned back on his knees. The girl was standing, whitefaced, in front of him, her hands raised to her chest. As he leaned back on a hand, looking at her, his fingers touched something. It was the poniard. He grasped it, then rose to his feet, a half smile playing over his face. He extended the weapon, handle first, to her.

"Yours, I believe," he said softly.

For an instant she merely looked at him. Then he saw the color mount to her cheeks.

"Take it," he insisted.

She extended her hand slowly, took it. Then she turned. He heard the rustle of her garments. The poniard was back in its hiding place. Turning around, she looked at the man on the tiles. She dropped to her knees, felt his forehead, then his wrist.

"He lives!" she breathed, glancing up at

Bannister. "But he is an old, old man—you might have killed him."

"And he might have killed me," Bannister answered, with sobered face.

"Ah, but hark!" She was on her feet again. "Do you not hear?"

He strained his ears. From the other side of the square came faint hoofbeats.

"They are coming, my friend!" she gasped, seizing him by the shoulders. "They heard the pistol shot. They're coming. They will take you, and this time you will not live!"

She seized her cape, threw it over her shoulders. Stooping, she picked up the old man's pistol, handed it to Bannister, saying:

"You must come with me. We must go *pronto*."

Picking up the one candle, she led the way through the curtains, down a long passageway and to a barred door. She threw the locks back, first extinguishing the candle and dropping it to the flagstones.

"Come!" She grasped his hand.

They stepped into a small courtyard. Two horses were tethered there. One with a sidesaddle.

"Lift me up quickly," she commanded.

He cupped his hands. She lifted one in step. He raised her to the saddle. He untethered the horses and leaped on the back of his own.

"This way," she called, riding ahead down a narrow alleyway.

As they went into a gallop, they heard the clatter of iron-shod hoofs coming to a stop on the cobblestones in front. Then a pounding on the door.

"Come, there is no time to lose," the girl called back, and lifting the quirt dangling from her saddle pommel, she lashed her mount.

It broke into a run as they left the alleyway and entered a winding trail. Bannister dug his heels in, lifted his reins and followed.

THE trail led straight ahead. Dense underbrush on either side. A hundred yards further they heard shouts and cries behind them and the pounding of hoofs. They had been seen and were pursued.

"We must not be caught—we *must* not be caught!" the girl cried, urging her horse onward with savage slashes of the quirt.

One shot, then two—then a fusillade burst on the air. Bannister heard the whine of bullets. The girl was in front of him. He was shielding her; but he was a clear target himself, in this brilliant moonlight. He had thrust the pistol she had given him into his pocket. Now he jerked it out. Holding his reins with his left hand, he leaned back, leveled his gun, pulled the trigger twice.

Bluish flames spurted out. There was one shot in reply, and then another ragged volley. Once more Bannister fired, then dropped his arm and faced the front.

The girl, he knew, was frightened. They were in danger, and if the worst did come, he had two bullets left. One for her and one for him.

The trail turned. Now it went upward. Fleet horses, these she had kept in waiting. Up the trail they went, winding and turning. Now their mounts were puffing, were barely dog-trotting—but they had left their pursuers behind.

"On, on!" the girl called, bringing her quirt down again.

The animal responded. Bannister's followed in speed. But a moment later the trail was too steep. The puffing beasts dropped to a walk. The girl looked back over her shoulder.

"We've left them behind," she called softly. "I do not believe they will follow. They dare not, for we have crossed the line, and ahead there will be help."

For another half hour, a period of silence, save for the rasping hoofbeats on the trail, they went into the hills. Coming to a slight clearing, the girl reined in her mount. Bannister drew alongside. She reached a hand out to him.

"My friend," she said softly, "forgive me for what I almost did to you. It was necessary. You will soon learn."

"There's nothing to forgive," he told her.

"Ah, yes, there is. Just for an instant I held the poniard over your heart."

"But it didn't strike home," he reminded her.

"No, but it might have done so; and I would have been sorry—so sorry. But now

I am glad, so glad that you are alive and with me." She flashed her dazzling smile on him. "I wonder if you can understand?" she asked, as she leaned slightly toward him.

He said nothing. In that moment, cloud-banks scurried over the moon. Nothing but stars above. His horse took one step to the right. Now he was beside her.

In the faint starlight, he could see her still smiling at him. Impulsively he threw an arm around her. She did not resist. He felt her breath on his cheek. Now he was kissing her, kissing her under the trail light of the stars.

"Oh, my beloved," she murmured at last, as she gently drew away. "I knew it would be some day; but not so beautiful as this."

She sighed. The silence was broken by the rattle of a rifle-bolt.

"Halt! Who's there?"

The words rang out in the stillness. The cloud-banks passed from the moon.

Thirty paces in front of them stood a soldier, leveling his rifle at them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DEFIANCE

IN ringing tones the girl answered the sentry's challenge: "Friends of the Don's!"

They lifted reins. Their horses moved forward.

"Halt!"

The command came again, when they were within six paces of the soldier. He stepped two paces to the front and looked up at them keenly. Recognizing the girl, he brought his rifle down to present arms.

"Pass," he called.

They rode on.

"That is an outpost of our forces," the girl told Bannister.

"But look here!" He rode beside her, speaking. "Just what is all this about? I understand you mistook me for a gun-runner. Now you know I'm not. So why—"

"So why have I kidnaped you?" she smiled across at him. "For two reasons, Señor Americano. First, it would have been very unhealthy for you to have been found with the old man. He may die yet, you

know. Yes, it was in self-defense," she hastened to add, "but so hard to prove.

"Second reason—" her tone became light—"is that you are going to be very valuable to me. I can use you quite well, so I took you. Now you are within our lines. You can't go back, not even if you want to. Do you?" she asked suddenly.

She drew her horse alongside his, smiled up into his face as she asked that question.

"No, I don't," he told her truthfully. "I'm going to see it through—whatever it is—with you. But won't you tell me where you are taking me?"

"You will know soon enough," she answered, as she spurred her mount on.

Now they were at the top of the pass. Again they were challenged, and again passed on. Now the trail went downward. Just before they came to a turn around a cliffside, they were stopped once more. The sentry spoke to her for a moment, in such low tones that Bannister could not hear the words. Then he stepped back and called out loudly:

"Pass on, Señorita."

They made the turn in the trail and came upon a sheltered campfire—a fire around which a dozen men were standing, as if awaiting her. One, the largest, came forward and held out his arms to her. She went into them. He lifted her down gently and kissed her on either cheek.

"The saints were kind tonight, my uncle," she said clearly, so that Bannister heard every word. "For behold, I bring to you an Americano. I captured him in La Bilbana. We kept tryst behind the Cathedral at midnight. And then I took him to the house in the lane. And what do you suppose happened, my uncle?"

The uncle could not say.

She continued. "I discover he is *not* the runner of guns—"

"That I see quite clearly," Don Esteban commented, looking at Bannister. "This is not the Americano with whom I dealt."

"But wait, I have more to tell you," she went on. "When we discovered that the Americano was not the right one—well, old Julio lost his head a moment. He thought the American was the gun-runner—that

he had sold out to Pablo Felipe—so he drew his pistol. He was about to shoot when—" She broke off and looked up at Bannister, who was still in the saddle. "You almost killed him, my friend," she said to him. "But he will live. He has the lives of a cat."

"And the rashness of youth, despite his age," the old man added. "But this Americano—" he began, when she stopped him.

"Ah, old Julio's pistol, it went off, my uncle, it made much sound; and the guard came on horseback—the governor's own guard—so we had to flee. We could not explain what we were doing, you know. The Americano rode Julio's horse and as we left the town they fired on us. He fired back. So you see he is one of us. And now, my friend," turning to Bannister, "you may dismount."

When he came to them, she presented him to her uncle. Quite gravely the rebel chieftain greeted the American.

"And so you join us," he said. "That is well—we need leaders, men who can ride and fight and *win*. You know horses, is it not so?"

"I was born with a polo mallet in my hand," Bannister answered.

"Polo! Ah, that is well. I need fighters, I need leaders; but above all, at this very moment, strange as it seems to you, I need one more player. I tell you—" He broke off as hoofbeats were heard. "Now what is that?" he asked aloud.

A moment later a horseman came around the turn, leaped to the ground, ran to Don Esteban, saluted him gravely and reported.

"Great news, my general! The vessel bringing guns has gone aground off Santos Point. It is now on the reef. We can take it. Pablo Felipe's forces do not know of it."

"See, I told you," the girl said to Bannister, "that the guns were coming. Now we have them without payment of gold. But you go with us. We need you."

"Yes," Don Esteban boomed, "the Americano goes with us. It is an American ship flying the American flag. He, an American, seizes it."

"What's this?" Bannister demanded.

"You have joined us, have you not?" the chieftain demanded. "Every man must

play his part. You seize the vessel—you go on board and claim it. I give you arms; I give you men. They follow you."

"Say, just what is this?" the American demanded sharply. "Sounds like piracy to me."

"Oh, no," Don Esteban explained. "It is merely an act of war."

"But look here!" Bannister retorted. "You can't make war on my country. And I am not turning pirate for you, or you either." He turned on the dancer.

"No, not even for me?" She smiled on him.

"No, not even for you!"

Her smile faded. She shrugged her shoulders and turned from him.

"You handle the Americano. I brought him here, I'm through," she told her uncle.

The older man stepped over, clapped a hand on Bannister's shoulder.

"You come with me; understand?"

"Like hell I will!" Bannister flared up.

For a moment the two men glared at each other. The American held his ground.

"And you don't dare touch a ship flying the American flag, either," Bannister said at last. "If you do, that's piracy. We hang men for that."

Don Esteban stepped back again and laughed.

"And you would do the hanging, I suppose!" he exclaimed. "You and you—" he pointed to two of his men, and motioned toward Bannister.

They leaped on him, downed him. He was tied hand and foot.

"Better a little gag, my uncle."

The girl turned, lifted her skirt and tore the edge from an undergarment. She gave it to Don Esteban. He stepped to the American, who had been put back on his feet.

"You gag me and you'll never forget it," Bannister said menacingly, "and you'll be sorry for it—sorry because there may be something I can tell you. Something that might help when you start to take that vessel. With a gag in my mouth I cannot speak."

Don Esteban hesitated.

"He is—the Americano is right," Señorita Carlotta said quickly, stepping between them. "And, my uncle, I fear that both of

us are wrong." She turned to Bannister. "I am sorry," she said. "This happened too quickly; but you shall be untied now."

She called to the men who had lashed his feet and his hands.

"Untie," she commanded, and raised a hand as her uncle started to protest. "No, you were wrong, I was wrong—we both were nervous. So much depends on getting those guns, that we forgot ourselves."

The rope was taken from Bannister's limbs. Now his hands were free. Señorita Carlotta put a hand on his shoulder.

"Please forgive. But you, too, would be a bit too zealous, perhaps, if success or failure hung on one night's work. You understand?"

"Perhaps," he answered shortly.

Then she flashed that gorgeous smile at him.

"Confound it!" he exclaimed. "A fellow can't be angry at you when you smile that way!"

She laughed and said, "All is well. We are friends once more. But come. I have an idea, my friend, we shall ride to Santos Point. We shall ride to view the gun-runner and perhaps—who knows?—we may get our weapons fairly. Come, my uncle, we go."

They mounted. The cavalcade moved down another trail, Don Esteban in the lead, the girl and the American behind him.

From time to time, when the trail widened, she motioned for him to ride beside her. More than once she reached her hand out to him. Time and again she smiled, that radiant, heart-warming smile.

"We are friends, you know," she told him more than once.

Now the trail went down steeply. From not far distant they heard the beat of breakers; they were nearing the beach. Now the trail turned. The sea was before them. And there, washed on a reef, so close that Bannister felt he could reach out and touch it, was a vessel.

"Behold!" Don Esteban exclaimed, as he drew rein. "It is the gun-runner!"

Bannister's eyes widened. It was not a gun-runner—it was the vessel—

"Say!" he exclaimed loudly. "That's the ship I missed in port tonight!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

GOLD AND SMILES

HHE chieftain turned on him. "Eh? What's this?" he demanded.

"That's no gun-runner," Bannister said scornfully. "That is the *Eastern Light*, a freighter that was carrying me and four polo ponies down to Rio. They had engine trouble yesterday. Put into the port to make repairs. I went ashore. Went to La Bilbana. And you," he turned on the dancer, "were so fascinating that you made me forget to return, so the ship sailed without me. But now I'm back again."

"But I fear, my friend," she answered, "it will be many a day before you sail on her. Behold, she lists badly. She's high on the rocks. The tide is running out."

The vessel did seem in a precarious position. Bannister wondered how a vessel in a clear moonlight night could run aground in such a manner. He could not fathom it.

"I'm going aboard," he told Don Esteban. "I have cargo on that vessel."

Even in the moonlight, the American could see the crafty look that came into the man's eyes.

"There should be much salvage there," he began, but Bannister broke in:

"There will be no salvage for you, Don Esteban. The master of that ship has not asked for help. I'm going aboard," he repeated.

"But you come back?" the girl asked in anxiety.

He hesitated a second. "Yes, Señorita, I'm coming back—to you," he finished softly.

DISMOUNTING, he dropped the reins to the ground, and without another word, he went into the water's edge. There he saw a broken line of rocks extending out to the reef, rocks still damp from the receding tide. Cautiously he began walking out toward the vessel. When he was within fifty yards, he hailed it.

"Ship ahoy!"

A seaman appeared at the rail, far above him, took one glance at him and then disappeared. A moment later the second officer peered down from the bridge.

"That you, Mr. Bannister?"

"Yes. What's happened to you? You ran away and left me. I thought you'd be in Rio by now."

"We blew for you, sir, and sent a boat ashore. You were not there. We had to heave anchor and leave without you. Sorry."

"Well, drop a ladder and let me come aboard," Bannister called.

He noted that the officer did not volunteer the reason for being on the reef. A rope ladder was dropped over the side. He climbed up it.

"What in thunder happened to you?" he demanded of the second officer, as he stepped on deck.

"Sh," the officer cautioned. "The old man's in the chart room now. Bad case of nerves. To tell you the truth, sir—but wait, here is the chief. Let him tell it."

The stocky chief engineer was coming forward. Bannister stopped him. The two had been friendly on the trip down.

"What happened to you, Chief?" he asked pleasantly.

"Nary a thing to me," the engineer answered, with a broad Scotch accent. "But if the old mon had waited a-weel, and had noo' been in such a dom hurry, my bearings would no' ha' got so vurra hot. But the old mon," he pointed a thumb toward the chart room, "he says to go. And we do. And the bearings, they get vurra, vurra hot. Now, you tell it, Meester Sanderson," he said to the second officer.

The latter finished the tale.

"We had another breakdown just as we were rounding Santos Point. And before we could drop more than one anchor, a tide rip caught us. Threw us on the rocks. We dragged our anchor all the time, and here we are. And if you ask me, Mr. Bannister, I think we'll be here till next Christmas, unless the tide comes in mighty high and lifts us off. Besides, we dented several of our plates. The old man's in the chart room with the mate now, trying to figure out his next move. Think he's going to wireless for a tug to come up from Rio and pull us off."

"Then what about my ponies?" Bannister demanded.

"None of my business, Mr. Bannister—

but if I were you, I'd take those critters out of those stalls and swim down to Rio with them. Come, I'll shew you."

He led the way aft. There were those priceless ponies, hunched up against the side of their improvised stalls, bracing themselves with their hoofs against the uneven deck.

Jock Hamby, Bannister's groom, was in their midst, trying to soothe them. He looked up as the two men approached.

"Say, for the luvva Pete, Mr. Bannister, let me take these ponies ashore. They're going to break their legs trying to stand upright."

"Even if a tide does lift us off now, how long will it be?" Bannister asked Mr. Sanderson.

"A full five hours," the officer answered, "and I might tell you this old barge is going to give a mighty lurch, Mr. Bannister, if the tide does lift us off. I wouldn't guarantee that those critters of yours won't be injured."

"Look here," Bannister said, "I can't run the risk of those ponies being battered up. You've got to put some steam in that winch, give me a sling and a surcingle, and let me lift them overboard. We're inside the surf here. I can lead them ashore."

"All right, if the old man says so," Sanderson answered.

"He will," Bannister told him and went forward again and knocked on the chart room door.

THE old man growled a command to enter. When Bannister stepped inside, the master and mate looked up.

"Oh, you!" the harried mariner said.

"Yes. Sorry I missed your signal, Captain. But look here. This vessel is listing so badly that my ponies can't stand upright. Those poor animals are bracing themselves against the deck, backing up against the wall. I want permission to drop them overboard in a sling. Let me take them ashore until the vessel rights itself."

"See the second officer, see the second officer," the Captain repeated. "Don't worry me with things like that!"

That was all Bannister wanted. He went outside. The second officer was waiting.

"What did the old man say?" he asked.

"He said to see you, Sanderson. And I guess that means O. K."

"Well, I guess it does, if you insist."

"I do insist."

"O. K. I'll drop them overboard. Oh, quartermaster!"

He began giving his orders. As they started aft, Sparks came from the radio shack with a message for the master.

"Say, take a squint at this, will you?"

He held out the message. It was a wireless just picked up. It stated:

U. S. Coast Guard Cutter number 11 at eight o'clock tonight stopped and seized the gun-runner *Mercury Maid*, of eight hundred tons, off Key West, Florida. The vessel was loaded with rifles, machine guns and ammunition. Forged papers and manifest declared she was en route from New York to Rio with machinery. But one of the captured officers has admitted the arms and ammunition were being run to the Republic of Santobel where a revolution is brewing.

Sparks took the paper back. "And we run on a reef off Santobel! Swell fix to be in, isn't it?" He went forward.

"So a nice little revolution is brewing here, eh?" Sanderson commented. "Well, if you're fool enough to take those ponies off—"

"That's my business, Sanderson," Bannister broke in. "Get steam in your winch."

He made no mention of his night's adventure. Sanderson would never understand. Now that the gun-runner had been captured, the revolution would be off again. Bannister smiled to himself. He knew the way of life in these South American republics. A revolution today, a fiesta tomorrow, a polo game the third day—then revolution all over again.

He went down to the stalls.

"Now, Jock," he told Hamby, "I'm going over side again. The water's receded. Nothing but mud down there now. You see that each pony is securely lashed to the surcingle and dropped over. Then, when the crane lowers them, I'll release them below. I'll have my hands full, too, so just the minute the last one comes over, you come and join me. Understand?"

"That's the first thing I wanna do, boss,"

Hamby told him. "I'm fed up with this sailor life. Let's go."

Bannister went down the rope ladder. As he stepped on the rocks again, he heard a hail. It was the dancer. She had ridden down to the beach. Now she was coming out toward him. When she drew rein at his side, she asked:

"Please tell me—are you coming back with us, Señor?"

"Maybe—maybe not," he answered.

Then he told her what had happened to the vessel.

"Now you see I told you the truth when I said I wasn't a gun-runner. Oh, by the way, would you like to know where that gun-runner is?"

She nodded with eagerness. He told her of the wireless dispatch.

"Yes, that was the vessel," she said softly. "The *Mercury Maid*. Now the other American never will come. We shall never have our guns. And as for the revolution—" she shrugged her shoulders helplessly—"I fear, my friend, that will never come to pass," she added.

They heard the whine of the winch, and shouts above, as the first pony was being placed in the surcingle.

"Ahoy there!" Sanderson was calling.

"Yes," Bannister answered.

"Are you ready?"

"I am. Lower away."

The crane was swung outward. In a surcingle, depending from a wire cable, hung pony number 1. He was kicking fiercely.

"Ah! A polo pony!" the girl exclaimed. "You are taking them all ashore?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered, then he told her the reason. "You know these ponies are worth about twelve thousand apiece. But one lurch of that vessel, one broken leg apiece, they're worth nothing except insurance money—and we don't want that. We were taking them to Rio for the games there; but I'm afraid we'll never make it."

"Wait, my friend, I have an idea. I tell you later. I help you, though."

SLOWLY the first pony was being lowered. As he came down, the animal caught sight of the dancer's mount. The

presence of another horse quieted his nerves. He ceased his frantic kicking. Slowly and gently he was lowered, until his feet touched the sands. Bannister was stroking his neck, and the Señorita moved her horse over beside him.

"He's quiet now," she said. "Give me his halter, while you release him."

Quickly Bannister undid the surcingle and lifted it clear from the pony. Then he signaled for it to be taken up again.

Three times more that performance was repeated. Then a fourth time the surcingle was lowered, this time laden with hay and a bag of oats. Jock Hamby came down the rope ladder.

"Thought we'd better have a little fodder along, boss. We may be down here some time."

"Come on. Let's get on the high shore," Bannister called.

He led the first pony, the girl the second. Jock Hamby brought the two remaining ones in the rear. When they reached the high ground above the wash of the tide, the girl waved an arm, and then shouted up the trail. There was an answering shout.

A moment later, Don Esteban and his cavalcade came down to them.

"Behold!" the girl exclaimed. "See what the Señor Americano has. But now it is going to be ours, and, my uncle, with these ponies we shall win. What matters it if the gun-runner never comes? And I tell you, my uncle—"

Here she told Don Esteban of the wireless message.

"But be not disheartened," she continued, "for I, Carlotta de Mareno y Ruelas, have one great idea. First, we shall take the ponies from the Señor Americano."

"Now just a minute!" Bannister stepped forward. "What foolishness is this?"

"No foolishness, my friend, merely an act of war. We seize your property—"

"Like thunder you do!" Bannister said emphatically. "I am an American citizen. You touch one of these ponies, and—"

"Oh, but my very good friend!" she exclaimed, smiling at him. "You do not understand. We do not seize your ponies—I was in error there—we buy them from you, we pay you gold. Understand?"

With a quick motion she drew the silken bag, with the gold intended for the gun-runner, from her bodice and tossed it at his feet.

"There, my friend, we buy the ponies—you sell them. And all these," she waved a hand at her uncle's followers, "are witnesses."

"I'll be—" Bannister started exploding, but she stopped him. And again she smiled, as she leaned over and said softly:

"The gold, my friend, is only payment for the ponies. But I shall pay you—with my smiles—for what I shall command you to do. Is not that payment enough?"

CHAPTER NINE

THE CHALLENGE TO PABLO FELIPE

BANNISTER stepped forward, put a hand on her horse's neck. "You're going to command me to do something? Is that it?" he asked. "You might explain."

She shook her head slowly, the smile vanished. "No, I shall tell you nothing. But I have an idea. I shall tell neither you nor my uncle what it is until we return to our hacienda down in the plains. We should make it by morning."

Bannister dropped his hand and stepped back. "You mean you're going to kidnap me and my ponies?"

Again she shook her head. "No—nothing so crude as that, my friend. Yonder lies your vessel. Were I you—and if I were as afraid as you seem to be—I would return to it. As for us," she waved a hand at the group behind her, "we shall ride off in the moonlight. And I shall always remember, remember with contempt, the Americano who was afraid of a woman. That is all.

"Take your ponies. Give me back my gold. You return to your ship, where all is safe; and you will not be endangered by a woman's smiles." She looked at him with a light of derision in her eyes.

Bannister felt himself flushing. The groom behind him was muttering, "What's all this about, boss?"

Bannister didn't answer; but he stooped, picked up the silken bag of gold, and handed it back to her.

"There is your gold."

"Thank you."

Her tone and the expression in her eyes were the same as if he were a *peon*. Then she lifted her reins to turn and ride away.

"One moment," Bannister called.

"Yes?" She glanced down at him coldly.

"There's something you want me to do for you?"

"Oh, no," she told him. "Never! I do all things for myself."

"But, just a minute." Again he was standing by the side of her saddle. "You do want me to do something; and I know that I owe you something, too. If you had not taken me out of that house behind the Cathedral—well, perhaps—" he broke off.

He knew that if he had been caught there, he could never have explained to Pablo Felipe and his followers. He would have been shot down as a dog. Yes, he did owe her something; but she had stunned him to the quick with her scorn. And—he had to admit to himself—he was intrigued by the mystery which she hinted. Looking up at her, he said softly:

"I am going with you."

For a moment she looked at him without speaking. Then she asked: "Are you not afraid?"

"Not when you are beside me," he told her, his face burning once more.

"Ah, that is better!" Her manner changed. "I like you for saying that, Señor Americano. You will come. You will be with us one—two—maybe three days. Ah!" She leaned over and whispered, "Perhaps a lifetime. *Quien sabe?*"

Once more he felt the witchery of her smile.

Behind him was the vessel and security. He knew that in its crippled condition, even if the tide floated it safely off the reef, the *Eastern Light* could not proceed to Rio alone. A tug would have to come for her. And that would take two or three or four days.

What was it that Señorita Carlotta had said? Two days, three days, or maybe a lifetime. Yes, he could go with her; and after it was all over—whatever adventure lay before them—with luck he could return before the tug from Rio arrived. There

would be questions from the master—but he would not have to answer them.

Then he remembered the trust imposed in him by the owner of those ponies, old Warren Dudley. The uncle of the girl who had called him a little playboy of the rich. Warren Dudley might own his oil fields, his silver mines and his vast forest lands; but his heart was in his polo ponies. He'd rather win a game with them, than secure a vast oil concession. He had money, but sporting glory was hard to achieve.

If anything happened to those ponies—well, it would be too bad for one Hugh Bannister of the U. S. A. And yet, if he had remained on board, they might have been crippled. And a crippled pony means a dead pony. No, he'd take the chance of the unknown. He'd explain to Mr. Dudley some day. The hot blood of youth had flowed once in Warren Dudley's veins; perhaps he would understand.

"Now, *Señorita*," he said softly, "I am at your command—I and my ponies. What shall we do?"

"Ah, that is good," she smiled. "Let each pony be led by one of my men. You mount your horse, ride with me. We go by another trail to El Rancho Santa Lucia."

Wheeling her horse, she spoke to Don Esteban, who had drawn away twelve paces with his men.

"My uncle, the *Señor Americano* and his polo ponies come with us as our guest at the rancho. And when there, I shall tell you my great idea. Please ask no questions now."

Evidently Don Esteban understood her methods. He asked no questions—merely nodded his head and waved a friendly hand to Hugh Bannister. Bannister turned to Jock Hamby.

"It's back to the ship for you, Jock."

"Hey! What's this, boss? What's up?"

"Nothing—and everything. You're going to be on that reef three or four days, Jock. I'm going into the interior, taking the ponies with me. You'll see me later."

"But look here, boss," Jock Hamby protested, "if anything happens to these here ponies—"

"If anything happens to them, it will happen to me, too. Go back to the ship."

"But what am I to tell the captain?"

"Nothing but what I've told you."

"But say, boss, are you coming back?"

This maneuver of Bannister's was outside his comprehension.

"Yes, I'll be back some day, Jock."

In the dazzling moonlight—moonlight that made the scene almost as bright as day—Bannister saw the wonderment in the man's face. He had lived according to rote all his life. He was floored by the unusual and the unexpected.

"It's all right, Jock. See you later."

He mounted his horse. The ponies were taken in hand by four of Don Esteban's followers. The cavalcade turned, went up the trail, and then sheered off to the left, along a broad way leading into the valley. Don Esteban, at the head of his group, broke into a slow canter.

AS he rode beside the girl, hearing the jingling of spurs, the crunching of leather, and the clump of hoofs, Bannister was exhilarated.

"Please, won't you tell me what it's all about?" he asked. "We started out in a revolution, I believe, and now—"

She laughed musically. "Wait and see, my friend. And if you are half as brave as I think you are, half as great a polo player as you should be—" She broke off and laughed again and tossed her head back. "What history we shall make! And your name, my friend, will go down in the history of Santobel as one of its heroes. But wait!" She looked at him sharply. "I do not even know your name."

"But I know yours. You are *Señorita Carlotta de Mareno y Ruelas*—"

"*Señorita Carlotta de Mareno*," she broke in. "The Ruelas, you know, is the maternal name."

Yes, he knew that Spanish custom.

"But yours, my friend, I must know."

"It is plain Hugh Bannister," he told her.

She repeated the words after him. For the first time in his life the name sounded musical, as she spoke it.

"And in your American way I call you *Señor Bannister*?"

"No, in our American way you call me Hugh."

Again she smiled at him. "Then let us be all American, and I am Carlotta to you. Understand?"

He nodded. And so they rode on down to the valley. An hour before the first streaks of dawn, they came to El Rancho Santa Lucia.

Bannister saw a group of low buildings. Not the adobe structures of the *peons*; but of gray limestone, quarried in the hills and brought down into the valley.

The main house, he could see from the elevation, was built as a closed square with an opened *patio*. And as they drew close, he saw the jasmine, the passion flowers growing riotously around it. Scarlet bougainvillea climbed over its walls.

"We are here! Welcome to El Rancho Santa Lucia, my Hugh!" she exclaimed, as they drew rein at the doorway.

Servants came out and took their horses. They entered into the cool of the long, low living room—a room luxuriously fitted with rugs and tapestries and rare old furniture.

The girl called one of her *peons*. Swiftly she gave him instructions. Turning to the American, she said:

"He will take you to your room. My cousin, who now is studying in Madrid, he left behind many things that you should wear. He was just your size. While here, you must be one of us, even in costume, you know."

"But—"

She raised a hand. Through an inner door came a tall youth with the blackest of hair and eyes.

"So you are back!" he cried, as he stepped forward and, ignoring the two men, took the girl's hands and kissed them.

"Now, now, Escamillo, little you cared if ever I returned!"

"Little I cared!" the youth cried. "I have prayed to the saints for you each night."

"And tonight—yes, tonight when I could have used you in La Bilbana, my friend, where were you? You were here. What is it you do? Ah, yes! You play the guitar, and you sing, and you dream of some day singing in opera. Is it not so?"

"I shall be the greatest Don José that Carmen has ever known," he bragged.

"And yet, your real name is Escamillo, she laughed. "But come, you must meet my new friend, Señor Hugh Bannister, of the U. S. A."

The Spanish youth had ignored Bannister until now. But as Bannister extended his hand, he was gracious enough to smile and bow—to smile with his lips.

Bannister did not like the look in his eyes. No need to be told that he was the devout worshiper of the fiery dancer.

"And now I tell you," Carlotta was speaking, glancing at Don Esteban, "my great plan. The day after tomorrow is the Fiesta of Roses, is it not? And has not Pablo Felipe challenged El Rancho Santa Lucia at polo that day?"

Don Esteban nodded.

"And we have not answered the challenge, have we, my uncle?" She continued speaking swiftly. "We have not answered because—shall I tell the Señor Americano? Yes, I shall. It is this, Hugh Bannister. Pablo Felipe has the best polo ponies in South America. Better even than those in Rio.

"We have the best players—we of El Rancho Santa Lucia—the best players in Santobel. But you know that the best mounted team generally wins. One year we beat Pablo Felipe at the Fiesta of Roses. Last year he beat us; and now, should he beat us day after tomorrow—" She broke off, her face sober. "Perhaps you do not understand, my Hugh, but the crowd goes only with the victor. If we are beaten, the *peons* will flock to Pablo Felipe. They will desert Don Esteban. And it will be Pablo Felipe who will seize the government and rule—not my uncle."

She turned to the older man. "How well you know me, my uncle." She spoke softly. "You asked not a question when I brought Señor Bannister to you. Again you asked nothing when we turned toward the rancho. Did not you see those marvelous ponies? I did not have to see them in action to know that they are better than any Pablo Felipe has.

"And so, even before the dawn breaks, we shall send our answer to Pablo Felipe. We do play against him at the Fiesta of Roses. Señor Bannister, he plays." She

turned on him. "What position do you like best? Number 1 man, or 2 or 3, or are you one of the backs?"

"Put me down as number 1 man," he told her.

"That is good. You will be an aggressor, not a defensive player. You will take the fight and the ball into Pablo Felipe's territory. Three of our best players will follow you—and, my uncle," again she faced the Don, "when El Rancho Santa Lucia wins, you will have all Santobel with you. And Señor Hugh Bannister of the U. S. A.," she stepped to his side and put a hand on his arm—"he will be the hero of the Fiesta of Roses." Her voice dropped. "You will be my hero always," she ended in a whisper. . . .

CHAPTER TEN

THE MYSTERIOUS WARNING

BEFORE dawn broke, Hugh Bannister was sleeping soundly in one of the guest rooms. Shades had been lowered against the coming sun. And he had been told that he would be called at noon. But just as a faint edge of light showed around the casements, he awoke with a start. What was that?

His ears heard a sharp, grating sound, as though a long disused portal was being opened. His eyes blinked, and growing accustomed to the semi-gloom, glanced around the room. Raising up on an arm, he searched for the origin of that sound.

There, on the wall to the left, a panel was slowly being slid back. In the dark of the recess, he saw something—a human figure garbed in black—move. Bannister leaped up. The same instant, something whizzed by his head, and buried itself in the wall behind him. The panel closed with a bang.

Turning, he saw a poniard-handle quivering. The point—the point intended for his heart—was buried deep in that wall.

Jerking the weapon free, Bannister ran to where the panel was. But now the wall presented a smooth surface, with just a bare crack showing. He could not slide the panel back.

He listened. He thought he heard foot-

steps—footsteps retreating down a stairway into the earth.

"I'll be darned!" he muttered to himself.

Who among Don Esteban's followers would make an attack on his life? Absurd question, he told himself. No doubt all the young men around him were in love with Don Esteban's beautiful niece. All of them had seen the smiles she had flashed on Bannister and the cordiality of her manner toward him. It was enough to arouse jealousy in any human breast. Bannister remembered the youth Escamillo.

He had plainly showed his displeasure at the intrusion of the American in the hacienda. Would Escamillo do it? He doubted it. He knew too well the sacred laws of Spanish hospitality. And yet, jealousy, like genius, recognized no code. Perhaps Escamillo had flung the poniard.

Certainly someone well acquainted with the house had done it.

Placing the poniard on a table—he would show it to the Don tomorrow, perhaps it would be recognized—Bannister went to bed again. Strangely, he slept soundly. The excitements of the night had exhausted him.

It was an hour after noon when he awoke. He glanced at the table. The poniard was gone!

Someone had tried to murder him in the night—and then returned during his slumber and retrieved the weapon. Why had not that someone murdered him in his sleep?

It was a someone who had lost his nerve, Bannister felt. And knowing that his weapon was marked, the man had entered during the night to remove it, so that his action would never be known.

Bannister shook his head. This was more than he had bargained for. This unknown might again gather enough courage to make a more successful attack on him. He would have to be on the *qui vive*. Whoever his foe was, he would strike again.

Lying on a chair was the outfit of Carlotta's cousin, which a servant had laid out for him the night before. Rapidly he dressed. Then he went into the *patio*. The incident of the poniard he would not mention. It would sound too fantastic.

CARLOTTA DE MARENO was sitting at a table by a lime tree, as he stepped into the sunlight. She rose and beckoned to him.

"Ah! You look strong today, my Hugh," she told him. "I have been waiting, expecting you. We shall breakfast together."

As they finished their strong coffee, she said: "Escamillo rode over to Pablo Felipe's rancho, after you went to sleep last night. He carried our answer to his challenge. He returned not so long ago. It is accepted," she told him.

Bannister thought quickly. If Escamillo had departed on that mission shortly after he, Bannister, went to bed, then it must have been someone else who had made an attempt on his life. Some impetuous youth, no doubt. Best to forget. He tried to dismiss it from his mind.

The girl was speaking again. "The Fiesta of Roses is held on Tortugas Plain. In the morning there is the grand procession. In the afternoon the game. All Santobel will be there. Your ponies," she added, "have been well groomed. The ride from the beach to the rancho last night limbered them up after their ship's confinement."

"I'd like to put a leg over one, right now," he told her.

"Come, let's go."

She led him out to the stables. An admiring throng of vaqueros were grouped around the imported ponies. They smiled and stepped back as Bannister and the girl approached.

"Here's my favorite," he told her, going to the bay. "Hello, Toddy. How's the boy?" he said, as he stroked Toddy's neck.

The animal nuzzled him a moment.

"He's as friendly as a dog—and he can stop on a dime," Bannister told the girl. "He's the finest polo pony that ever came out of North America."

The girl had one of her grooms saddle Toddy.

"Don't you want to take a turn up and down the field?" She indicated the practice ground lying behind the stables. "Miguel and José and Lupe, they play with you tomorrow. I'll send them out shortly with mallets and ball. And we shall have—how

do you say it in *Americano*?—a *second string team* to play against you a few moments this afternoon."

"But Escamillo—doesn't he play?" he asked.

"He play!" she retorted. "Ha! Escamillo, he only sings!"

Bannister smiled at that. It was evident that, though Señorita Carlotta was an artist herself—an artist of the dance—she had little admiration for the male of the species who followed the gentler arts.

A groom gave him the reins. Toddy now had one of the high-pommeled South American saddles on his back. The animal did not seem happy.

"Come on, old boy." Bannister stroked him again. "You're going to get used to these new trappings."

He spoke in English to the pony. Then he leaped into the saddle and rode out on the practice field. The ride of the night before had taken the kink out of Toddy's legs. It was good to be on a pony's back again, to hear the crunch of leather, the pounding of hoofs on the turf—Like a shock Toddy sprang forward. Instinctively Bannister dug his feet in.

There, ahead of him, was rolling a white wooden ball. It was a polo ball. And someone—out of the corner of his eye he saw Carlotta on the sidelines—had thrown the ball onto the playing field. It must have been she.

Toddy, well trained animal that he was, was following the ball. He overtook it just as it lost momentum. Toddy stopped on the proverbial dime.

"It's all right, old boy. You're in form," Bannister told him.

Carlotta rode over to him.

"I knew you had a great mount," she said. "He's beautiful. Your other ponies, are they just as well trained?"

"Almost," he told her. "But Toddy is the cream of the lot."

The other players were now coming on the field. When they rode over to Bannister, Carlotta spoke quickly.

"Now, remember, they take orders from you. You tell them what to do. Don Esteban has explained who and what you are."

"How does he know?" Bannister asked.

"How does he *know*?" she repeated. "My dear Hugh! You of the northland think we are ignorant south of the equator. Perhaps so, in some things, but we know our polo, my friend. And when I told Don Esteban your name, he brought out a magazine from Rio—a magazine with your picture on this very pony. You are a celebrity, my friend."

He laughed at that and said, "If I am, I won't be if I lose tomorrow. We are celebrities only while we win." And then, to the men who now had drawn close: "Who plays back?"

Miguel did. Bannister liked the keen looks of the man.

"I'm going to be number 1 man. Who are 2 and 3? Who play the other positions best?"

José liked to be number 2 man. And Lupe swore by the saints that he wasn't bad in number 3 position.

The second string team was already organized.

"Now we play just one chukker. Miguel, José, Lupe—you speak English?"

None of them did.

"That doesn't matter," he answered. "The ponies you are now on have been trained to follow the ball. This afternoon I want you to get accustomed to them. Tomorrow we shall play this way. The first chukker we shall use my ponies. In the second and the third we will use relays of yours. And then in the fourth we come out with these again, all freshened up. Then we rest there until the sixth and last chukker."

"And now I am referee," the girl, who was riding astride, called. "Give me the ball."

It was handed to her. She rode to the center of the rectangular field. Bannister rode down into the enemy's territory, within fifty yards of the goal post.

Number 2 man took his position near the center line, where the referee was, and halfway out on the field.

Number 3 man was planted midway in the home territory; and the back rode close to his own field post.

The second string team paired off opposite them. Bannister knew that polo was

scored the same way the world over. The rules were universal. One point for each time the ball was driven through the enemy's goal post.

"Wait," he called to the girl. "Tomorrow, are the players handicapped?"

"No handicap in the Fiesta of Roses," she answered. "We go in on equal terms."

Maybe that was good, maybe that was bad, Bannister thought. But he had no more time to consider it, for Carlotta tossed the ball into play.

With a swoop José's pony covered it. As the opposition crashed down, José's mallet swung over with a hard backswing. The ball bounded forward. Toddy was running straight toward it. As the ball approached, the animal wheeled. José's mallet struck the ball lightly, and with Toddy loping alongside, cradled it forward. There was the pounding of hoofs beside him, but Toddy rode off the opposition. The ball went over the line.

It was an excellent piece of impromptu team work. And in the next six minutes, Bannister saw that he was playing with three of the most highly skilled polo players he had ever known.

"You're good," he told them, as he dismounted and turned Toddy over to a groom.

They grinned their appreciation.

"And if you are half as good tomorrow," he added, "we'll give that Pablo Felipe a run for his money."

As they walked off the field together, a strange vaquero rode up to them, dismounted. He swept his sombrero from his head, and, with exaggerated politeness, approached, bowed to the girl, and then in halting English spoke to the American.

"Meestar Bannister?"

Bannister nodded.

"I have thees note for you, Señor."

He placed a piece of paper in Bannister's hand, then leaped on his horse and dashed away.

"That was one of Pablo Felipe's men," she told him. "Read it quickly, tell me what it says."


He opened it.

There was only one word. It was *cu-dado*—beware!

The girl gasped. "That is Pablo Felipe's work! He has heard of you, knows you have joined us. He is trying to scare you, my friend. But I wonder who told him—we were keeping all this secret." She nodded at him and the ponies. "We have a spy, an enemy in our own lines. *Cuidado!* We must *all* beware!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE ROSE OF LOVE

 HE day of the Fiesta of Roses dawned. Twice during the night Bannister awakened. Each time he heard the measured tread of a sentry in the patio. A guard that Don Esteban had placed over him. For the night before, having received that mysterious warning in the afternoon, he had confided in the Don the experience of the poniard and the sliding panel.

The Don had investigated the room thoroughly. That panel had not been used for years. It led to a stairway that went underground and into a tunnel that extended two hundred yards from the building, coming out in an *arroyo*.

Don Esteban sent his men through the tunnel. Someone had passed through there the night before, and the rocks that had covered the tunnel's entrance were found removed.

"The secret passageway," the Don said, "was used over one hundred years ago as a means of retreat, in case the hacienda was overpowered."

The Don confessed he was puzzled, and heartily embarrassed that the guest under his roof should be so threatened.

"It must have been one of Pablo Felipe's men. News travels fast, my friend, on the pampas. He would kill you, rather than have you play against him today. For much, ah, so much, depends on this game."

The panel, of course, had been nailed up, and the tunnel entrance again walled up; but still the sentry was placed in the patio.

Now Bannister dressed. For the Fiesta game, the players wore fiesta garb. The sombrero. The short, gold-embroidered jacket. The trousers—high-waisted and

bell-bottomed, and piped with braid. Low boots. A silk shirt, and a scarlet kerchief, which Hugh Bannister wound into a stock around his neck.

Shortly after the lunch hour, Don Esteban and the retainers of El Rancho Santa Lucia sallied forth, Don Esteban at their head. Behind him, Señorita Carlotta and Hugh Bannister, side by side. Then José and Lupe and Miguel. Behind them a group of vaqueros, each leading a tethered polo pony.

The road wound around a high hill. When they gained its summit, Carlotta called softly: "Behold the Fiesta of Roses!"

Below them was a long plain dotted here and there with adobe huts. In the center a polo field. And now, marching across that field, in fiesta attire, were groups of men and groups of women, and then groups of children. All were passing a stand on which sat the representative of the dictator—who preferred the pleasure of Paris to his rightful labors in Santobel.

As each group passed the stand, flowers were tossed at the feet of the dignitary, a squat and pock-faced dignitary.

Carlotta spoke in fierce tones: "A shame! Our president should be here on this day! Do you see that man, my friend?" She nodded to the representative. "He is sitting in the chair that Pablo Felipe desires, but which Don Esteban shall occupy—shall occupy after you win today," she finished, in an undertone.

A marimba band was playing. The crowd was marching and counter-marching. The pile of roses was growing higher and higher. All the while the squat and pock-faced man sat nodding, as if bored.

Now the parade was over. The stand was drawn back. The field was cleared.

Somewhere there was a flourish of trumpets, and onto the field swept fifty vaqueros. At their head rode Pablo Felipe. The crowd cheered. There had been no demonstration when Don Esteban arrived. Bannister noted this difference—the crowd was with the younger man.

Carlotta rode to Bannister's side, and speaking in a low tone, said: "May I tell you something, my friend?"

"Why, of course," he answered, sensing something in the change of her manner.

"It is this, Hugh." For the first time she spoke his name as friend to friend. "Pablo Felipe—he has sought my hand, and I have refused him. Word has come to me that he has boasted that after he wins today—yes, if he does—that he shall carry me off with him, as his prize."

"Don't worry; that will never be," Bannister told her. "We will win. I promise you that."

A whistle blew.

"The signal, my friend. But wait, I have something for you." Taking her kerchief of lace and silk, she tied it around his left arm. "That, my Hugh, is for luck. May luck ride with you."

THE Don led his men into the center, where they faced their opponents. A straight-sitting, white-haired official rode between them and reined in his mount. He was the official referee. In a loud voice he proclaimed:

"This, my friends, is the one hundred and fifth Fiesta of Roses. And now the game begins—the game that decides the championship of Santobel. May the best team win."

The whistle blew. A white ball was tossed into the center of the field. The game was on.

For seven and a half furious moments that ball, now driven, now cradled, was passed up and down the field. The whistle blew, without a goal being made either side. Nothing to nothing. As Bannister dismounted between the chukkers, he had to admit that this was the fastest game that he had ever played. These vaqueros were born horsemen, and seemingly as skilful at defense as at offense. Twice he had almost made a goal. Each time he had been cleverly blocked.

Now fresh ponies were brought forth. Someone touched Bannister on the arm. He turned. It was Escamillo, the man who would be the great singer. The youth was smiling.

"My congratulations, Señor Bannister. You are playing magnificently."

Bannister was taken aback by the man's

cordiality, but he smiled his thanks as he mounted his pony. It was hard to believe that this smiling youngster might be the spy in their own camp. *Quien sabe?*

Again the whistle blew. Again the ball was tossed out. Number 3 man for Pablo Felipe crashed the ball toward his goal post. Lupe spurted forward, caught it with a magnificent underswing. The ball rolled toward José, Lupe following and trying to cradle it. Bannister's pony had leaped forward. Lupe was missing the ball. Bannister swung his mallet with an overhand swing. He was bringing it down when something smashed with terrific force against his thigh. He reeled back. His mount plunged. Bannister fell.

Hoofs kicking around him — mallets flashing and swinging — players shouting and cursing—he managed to roll clear. For an instant he lay gasping. The fall had knocked the breath from him. His thigh felt as if it were broken. He heard Lupe protesting vigorously to the referee.

"Pablo Felipe, he deliberately struck the Señor Americano with his mallet. I saw him."

"I'm all right," Bannister said. "Get me up on the pony again."

Though the others protested, he mounted. The game went on. The ball was bounding into his territory. His mount wheeled and started for it. A beautiful sideswing—his mallet caught the ball and sent it straight down the field. José cut across. Pablo Felipe cracked the ball evenly, and sent it beneath the hoofs of an opposition horse. Lupe caught it, rode alongside—was cradling it with short, choppy strokes, when an opponent crashed his mallet down. It smacked the mallet from Lupe's hand, sent the ball bounding across field. Another of Felipe's men met it, sent it bounding up the field.

Both Bannister and Pablo Felipe were tearing down the field toward it. Bannister rose in his saddle to make a backhand swing, to strike the ball and send it behind him. But a hot flash of pain shot through his thigh. He fell to his saddle. In that instant, Pablo Felipe, by his side, leaned forward and, with a perfectly timed swing, struck the ball squarely, and sent it up the

field for a goal. It was a beautiful thirty-yard shot.

The whistle blew. The chukker was over.

THE American ponies were brought forth and Bannister mounted Toddy. They rode onto the field. The whistle blew for the third chukker.

The ball was tossed in. Like a flash, an American-bred pony shot down the field. Lupe caught the ball, shot it up. The back came after it as it bounded on. Bannister leaned far over and with a beautiful back-hand swing, caught it squarely.

Crack! The ball sailed into the air. Toddy wheeled and dashed after it. Pablo Felipe came alongside. Toddy extended himself, and left Felipe behind.

"Good boy, Toddy!" Bannister called, as he swung out, caught the ball and shot it squarely between the goal posts.

It was a beautiful forty-yard drive. The crowd broke into another roar. Bannister turned to acknowledge the applause, but Toddy began acting strangely. The pony was pawing the ground now, tossing his head wildly. Something was wrong. Toddy threw his head back. It struck Bannister in the face.

"Great Scot!" he murmured.

He threw his hand up and rubbed his forehead. He believed he could guess what the trouble was. He slid from his saddle.

"Wait a minute, old fellow," he called.

He held Toddy's head high. There, he saw it—a sponge in the pony's right nostril!

"My pony's been sponged! Someone has tried to cut his breath off," he called, as the referee rode up to see what the trouble was.

It was the friendly Lupe who dismounted, pulled the sponge from the animal's nostril and cursed loudly.

"Someone, one of our own people, did this," he muttered, "and we shall catch him."

Pablo expressed regret that anyone should stoop to such a low act. By the saints, he swore, he had no knowledge of it.

Again they took their positions. But now an angry mutter was heard from the crowd. The word was being passed. Someone was trying to injure one of Don Esteban's horses—the one ridden by the Señor Americano.

Again the whistle blew. The ball went into action. Riding like mad and disregarding his own position, Bannister swept down the field, crashed into the group, beat out savagely with his mallet.

Toddy wheeled and plunged. The ball was down among the ponies' hoofs. It was a wild scramble. Then José hooked it. It struck the fetlock of Pablo Felipe's horse and bounded back almost into mid-field. Bannister leaned far out, caught it with the tip of his mallet, and started it toward his goal. Pablo Felipe shot forward. The American pony crashed against his mount. Pablo Felipe lost balance as he swung his mallet high and flew crashing to the ground. Toddy sped on.

Six players were shouting behind Bannister. Toddy drew closer to the ball. Again Bannister leaned out, tapped it, cradled it forward another ten yards. Again and again he struck it, as they sped forward. Then, as if sensing the danger from the group behind, Toddy put on a magnificent burst of speed. Bannister rose in his saddle, swung his mallet in a wide arc. It caught the ball on a bound—and sent it straight and through the goal post fifty yards ahead.

The whistle blew, ending the chukker. Score—2 to 1, favor of Bannister's men.

The crowd broke into another roar of applause, and then turned into a wild tumult. Some word was passing through the throngs. Now they were running over the field, the vaqueros unable to beat them back. Someone was by Bannister's side. It was Carlotta de Mareno, on her horse. She was plucking his arm.

"Come, you must know we have found him."

Then strange cries: "Down with Pablo Felipe! Kill Pablo!"

THE Fiesta of Roses turned into a riot. In one corner of the field Pablo Felipe formed his vaqueros. They took the offensive, charged on the crowd.

From the sidelines came Don Esteban's men, cracking their long quirts.

"Get out of this! We must get out of this!" The girl was tugging at Bannister's arm.

"Kill Pablo Felipe!"

Bannister heard the cry again. Suddenly Pablo Felipe raised his arms, shouted to his men. They turned, retreated across the field. Behind them, shouting and cracking their quirts, were Don Esteban's retainers. Pablo Felipe and his group galloped far to the west and disappeared over the hill.

Now Bannister was back on the sidelines. Don Esteban was shaking an old, white-faced man by the shoulders.

It was Julio—the Julio who had tried to kill him in the shadow of the Cathedral.

"You dog! You traitor!" Don Esteban shouted. "You tried to kill him first! More than once news has been carried to the other side. You have been the traitor in our ranks. Who has paid you? If you do not tell, we burn you alive tonight!"

Old Julio slumped to his knees. Don Esteban jerked him up.

"Confess!" he said sternly.

"It was Pablo Felipe. Pablo Felipe was going to win the Señorita Carlotta. He promised me much gold."

The Señorita, who was standing beside the amazed Bannister, spoke out clearly, so that the milling crowd around could hear.


"But Pablo Felipe has lost me forever, thanks to the bravery of the Americano, my friend, Señor Hugh Bannister."

She turned to him. The crowd, sensing a moment of drama, became still. Taking a red, red rose from her hair, she placed it to her lips an instant, then leaned over and stuck it in his jacket.

The crowd cheered lustily.

CHAPTER TWELVE

UNDER THE SOUTHERN CROSS

 HE old freighter, *Eastern Light*, was wallowing down to Rio at last. Hugh Bannister was standing alone at the rail. Far to the north he could see a few lights blinking—the lights of Santobel.

The things that had happened there seemed like a dream to him. And now old Esteban was dictator, and the lovely Carlotta was the power behind the throne. For the wily Esteban had seized the reins of government when the crowd swung to his side at the Fiesta of Roses. And Hugh

Bannister had returned with his ponies to the *Eastern Light* just before a tug pulled her off the reef. And Carlotta—

He mused a moment. That last half hour with her, under the Southern Cross, was a memory he would ever hold dear. It had been a parting not of sweethearts, but of friends. The Señor Americano would come back some day, would he not? she had asked. Yes, some day, he had answered.

He was still standing by the rail alone, when Sparks came from the radio shack.

"A flash for you, Mr. Bannister. Needs an answer. Want to come in the shack and read it?"

Bannister followed the operator back into his quarters. The message read:

Understand you have many friends in South America. Word just received here of revolution in Santobel. Don Esteban now dictator. Please make contact with him through your friends. Seeking Santobel oil concessions. Will make it worth your while. Radio immediate answer. Evelyn sends her love.

The name signed to it was Warren Dudley.

Bannister smiled to himself. Yes, considering that Warren Dudley's polo ponies had played their part in that bloodless revolution, he felt certain that he could gain contact with one Don Esteban.

Then his face sobered. Evelyn sends love! He laughed to himself.

"Give me a sheet of paper, Sparks."

He wrote his answer:

Will contact Esteban and promise you can get concessions. Then he thought a moment and lifted his pencil. He added the words: Love to Evelyn.

Back in Santobel was the lovely Carlotta—but on Long Island was a girl who spoke his own tongue, the girl he loved. Some day he would tell her of the adventure with the flaming dancer. But no, perhaps better not. He would keep that to himself. A beautiful memory of glamorous adventure under the Southern Cross. . . .

(The End)



"I'll have to go ashore, Miss Forsythe," he said simply. "Have to find another job. It's the only thing to do..." (Page 101.)

BEYOND THE BAY

By

R. Exon Butchart

CHAPTER ONE

MASKS OFF



HE air in the tiny saloon seemed suddenly to have grown overwhelmingly oppressive. Helen Forsythe put her hand to her throat, as though to loosen some constriction that had seized upon it.

"You mean that you love me?" she asked incredulously.

Manuel Girondez spread his hands in an expressive gesture.

"Why else should I be here?"

The words came softly, with the peculiar lisping quality that was an inheritance from the speech of his mother, who had never lost her Castilian lisp, in spite of her years in England.

Helen stared at him in mingled contempt and vague fear.

She had never, at any time, liked this half-breed Spaniard, who owned the concession to one half of Hell's Bay pearling ground. She had always had the same aversion to him that she had to snakes and devil-fish. The fact that she and her father owned the other half of the lease of Hell's

Bay had thrown them into occasional contact. And now—

"You mean to say—" Helen's voice was icy, and each word came singly, individually, as though forced out of her by sheer incredulity—"you mean to say that you pretend to love me, and yet can force your presence on me within a day of my father's death?"

The half-breed made an apologetic gesture.

"It is because of my love, Señorita. You need protection. Broome is not the best of places for a young lady to stay alone."

Helen Forsythe's eyes kindled in anger.

"It's a pity you did not think of that last night, isn't it?" she said bitterly. "You were in the room when my father was shot—yet you made no attempt to protect him."

The man's eyes narrowed. "He was foolish, your father. He could see that the native was crazy with drink—"

"Your drink!"

The girl's voice rose angrily. She knew the story of that fatal fight the night before. They had told it to her when they had brought the dead body of her father back to the schooner.

"You had been giving the native drink

all the evening—and somehow it was you who managed to get in the road of his pursuers when he was escaping. You may even now be hiding him.”

Her eyes bored into his, and for a moment he looked away. Her voice went on, calm now.

“It was a pity the Coroner could not have taken suspicions as evidence today. There would have been more than one who would have thought as I did. You load with drink a strange Kanaka who is unknown to anyone here, and then, for no apparent reason, he picks a quarrel with my father. He comes straight from your table, and within five minutes”—her voice dropped suddenly, so that her next words were scarcely above a whisper, a heart-broken lament—“within five minutes my father is dead. Murdered.”

The half-breed made a protestive gesture.

“It was regrettable, *Señorita*. A tragedy of tragedies! I would have prevented it. I swear by the Holy Virgin I would have prevented it if I had guessed—if I had had the faintest suspicion that such a thing was going to happen. But the man was mad with drink.”

“Drink that your money bought!” the girl repeated bitterly. “Oh, you may protest that it was not your fault that my father was killed—but it was you who made that Kanaka mad with drink!”

“Please, *Señorita*! I have tried to explain! He came to me with the story of a wonderful new pearling ground—one a hundred times better than this Hell’s Bay that we share; though perhaps that is not saying much. However, I thought that I would make inquiries, discreet inquiries, of him. I did not know that he was so easily influenced by drink.” His expressive hands spread themselves in another gesture of helplessness. “I am sorry, *Señorita*—and I have come to offer you my help and protection. I desire to marry you. I cannot offer more, surely?”

THE girl studied him in perplexity. He was so apparently sincere, so utterly unhappy that the murderer should have been drinking with him before, native-like,

he had run amok. And it seemed scarcely likely that Manuel Girondez, if he were indeed the inciter of her father’s murder, would have come so soon with his proposal of marriage.

Not that she intended to accept it. A million pounds would not have persuaded her even to consider the proposal. But the man himself puzzled her. She had only to study his eyes to see that, in his own way, he loved her. It was a realization that revolted her. And yet, it made her position difficult.

She could not bring herself to believe that Manuel Girondez, loving her, would be so callously, so cold-bloodedly calculating as to engineer the death of her father as a means to gaining his ends.

No, she decided, it was more likely that he was simply taking advantage of the opportunity that had offered. It was probably mere coincidence that the man who had killed her father had been drinking with Girondez just previously. It was not such a very uncommon thing for natives to appear at times with tales of newly discovered pearl fields. Unable themselves to profit directly by their discoveries, they were compelled to find white men to finance them—and to rob them eventually. . . . And yet, it was an odd coincidence.

“Did you find out where this new ground is supposed to be?” she asked.

The half-breed’s eyes grew crafty, and he hesitated for a second before he answered.

“No—I was still priming him,” he told her, with a little shrug at the implied dishonesty. Manuel Girondez, his gesture said, had had no intention of paying any more for the information than he could help. He had been hoping to get it for the price of a few drinks.

The girl stared at him contemptuously.

“How unfortunate!” she said, and the hatred and sarcasm in her voice brought a suggestion of color even to the half-breed’s cheeks. “What a pity! And now you will have to go back to Hell’s Bay, and keep on with the old, sad hunting.”

With a strange cry, Girondez leaned forward across the table, and tried to take her hand.

"Señorita, that is true. But let us go back together. Let us no longer be rivals. We can unite in all things—our lives, and our labors, too. Why should we strive to beat each other—the one strive to collect a little more shell than the other—when we could be one?"

He had suddenly lost all appearance of craftiness. His eyes burned into hers with a fervor that was unmistakable. Whatever else he might be, or do, that was despicable, the fact shone from his eyes that he loved her truly. It might be the only worthwhile sentiment that he could claim, but, for the moment, it made him a little better than the brute beast that he usually approximated.

And then, even as he still leaned forward in the attitude of pleading, a sudden change came over his expression. It was nothing definite; Helen could not even decide in what way his expression had altered, but she suddenly felt a little thrill of terror run down her spine, and she forced herself to rise. She had the idea that she was staring into the eyes of a snake; that she was being hypnotized against her will. And it was as though she were edging cautiously from a snake's presence that she backed slowly away from the table.

She could not take her eyes from his face. The low receding forehead with the sleek, heavily oiled hair above it; the bushy eyebrows that overhung crafty, shifty eyes; the too thin, too finely chiseled nose, and the red, full-lipped mouth below. All these were merged into a single whole of evilness. For a moment Manuel Girondez had allowed his naked soul to show. Then, as suddenly, his expression altered again, and he, too, rose, one hand outstretched in appeal.

"Señorita! Helen!"

"No!" The girl's self-control suddenly came back to her. "Marry you? I would sooner marry a native!"

She broke off with a gesture that conveyed all the loathing and the hatred that she felt for him. And he knew that her suspicions had sprung to life again.

"So—" He stared at her, and his lips drew back into an unpleasant leer that

brought the whiteness of perfect teeth flashing into view. In that instant Helen realized that love and hate are never very far apart, in such as Manuel Girondez, at least.

"Perhaps," he snarled, "it is just as well that you say no. These rumors—perhaps they are not so untrue as one would like to think—about one's future wife!"

"What do you mean?"

Helen stared at him in astonishment. This new approach of attack was beyond her comprehension. Girondez laughed unpleasantly as he read the question in her eyes.

"Such pretty innocence!" he sneered. "But it does not fool me, Señorita. I was prepared to forget what I had heard, if you had agreed to be my wife." He paused and his eyes traveled insolently over her. "But it is just as well, I think, that you refused me—and so politely! It makes it definite, does it not? Well, that is to the good. I think, after all, I should prefer a wife who is above suspicion."

Helen studied him in bewilderment. What on earth was he driving at? That there was something in his mind, something unpleasant, was obvious. But what it might be she could not say.

The half-breed laughed again. "Such pretty innocence! Oh, yes, but it is charming! And yet, I have heard it whispered in Broome this morning that the lovely Señorita was aboard her schooner last night—and that a young Englishman, too, was here!"

Girondez lit a cigarette and surveyed her sardonically through the blue veil that rose from his lips. He enjoyed the changing expressions that flitted in turn across the girl's face. Incredulity, astonishment, horror, disbelief — they were all mirrored there.

Helen compressed her lips. So that was what they were saying in Broome! And this man—

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sudden opening of the saloon door. The young man framed in the oblong nodded pleasantly.

"I think"—he remarked in a silky voice, his eyes on the half-breed—"I think that

you were speaking of me. Scarcely eavesdropping, you know, because I could hear you as I came down the companionway."

CHAPTER TWO

CLASH

HELEN stared at the newcomer in mingled relief and agitation. She was more than glad that his coming would put an end to the unpleasant interview with Girondez, but her cheeks burned as she realized that he had heard the half-breed's last words.

The younger man eyed them in turn. What a contrast, he thought. The dark, too-sleek Girondez, and Helen Forsythe!

In that setting, with the half-breed as contrast, her loveliness seemed more dazzling than ever. And with her soft blue eyes wide with emotion, and a warm flush in her cheeks, her golden hair seemed more ethereal than real. She was a vision that caught his breath, and held him for the moment motionless, oblivious of all but her presence.

It was a furtive movement on the part of Girondez that recalled the newcomer to realities. He turned again to stare at the half-breed, and the tenderness that a moment before had lighted his eyes as they had rested on the girl was gone. The pupils, pinpoint with cold, calm rage, were surrounded by irises whose blue seemed suddenly to have changed to steely gray. He was not more than average height, indeed Girondez probably gave him an inch at least, and yet, as the younger man moved slowly toward him, the half-breed seemed dwarfed into insignificance; an illusion that was heightened as he started to slink away, edging round the table.

The younger man shook his head.

"No go, my friend," he said. "If you think I am going to follow you round and give you a clear break for the door, you're badly mistaken. I wasn't born yesterday, and I've met your kind before now. Stand still!"

The command rapped out with the staccato explosiveness of a revolver shot. The half-breed halted involuntarily. As Helen, a few moments before, had been nearly

hypnotized by the half-breed's eyes, so now Manuel Girondez was under the spell of the newcomer's voice.

"You were speaking of me," the younger man said softly. "Perhaps you would like to continue your remarks—after Miss Forsythe has gone to her cabin."

He turned to Helen with a little gesture of request. She nodded, and moved toward the door at the further end of the saloon. At the threshold she paused for a moment.

"You'll be careful, won't you?" Her voice was urgent.

Frank Craig, the newcomer, nodded.

"I don't think I'll be getting hurt," he said, and added: "Will you please lock the door after you?"

As the door closed behind the girl, Frank Craig turned on the half-breed, his eyes were steely.

"Now talk! What the devil have you been saying?"

Manuel Girondez said nothing. He was trying to steady his racing pulses, trying to force his brain to think rationally—and rapidly. He must find some feasible excuse for his presence here. His real objective he did not dare to explain. There was that in the younger man's eyes that told him that mention of sentiment would be unwise.

As his uneasy mind labored to find the necessary answer to the other's question, the half-breed's shifty eyes studied the saloon and its exits. But there was no chance of escape. The only other door was that through which Helen had vanished, and he had heard the key turned in the lock, on the other side, in obedience to Craig's request. That left only the door leading to the deck companion, and Craig himself blocked the approach to it.

"Well?"

The younger man's voice cut in on his agitation, forcing him to say something.

"I came—" Girondez licked his half dry lips. If only he had brought a knife with him! He could soon have finished this young autocrat, he reflected, even though it meant hanging afterward. At the moment, he felt it would have been worth it. "I came—"

His voice died away. He could think of nothing to say.

Frank Craig supplied the answer for him.

"You came to worry Miss Forsythe," he said. "You came to offer her marriage. *You!* Oh, yes, I heard that, too. About the wife of Manuel Girondez having to be above suspicion!" Craig's eyes suddenly blazed, and Girondez took a hasty step backward. Craig laughed. "And yet, strangely enough, Girondez himself is not above suspicion," he said.

His voice grew suddenly quiet again; ominously quiet. "You may really have heard the rotten innuendo that you hinted of to Miss Forsythe, or you may not. But I have heard rumors today in Broome, too—and not half an hour ago. I heard someone wondering just how far it was chance alone that the man who killed Captain Forsythe had been drinking with you."

"It is a lie!" Girondez spat the words out. "It is a lie, and you know it! Why should I want to kill that man?"

Craig shrugged. "God knows," he said. "And why should I waste my time on you? I was going to give you a hiding, but I don't think I will—I prefer not to dirty my hands. And I think that justice will find its own way, if you did instigate the murder."

He opened the door. The air of tension suddenly dispersed as the sounds of the outer world came to them down the companionway. Frank Craig had come to a rapid, and to his own mind, an astonishing decision. He was going to let this unpleasant half-breed get away without his thrashing.

It was not that his fingers no longer itched to be pounding themselves against the other's sleek, sly head and face. It was simply that discretion had won the day. There was Helen Forsythe to think of. It would have been foolish to have let his temper and indignation make of the half-caste Spaniard an everlasting and dangerous enemy. Until things were more settled, until he knew what his late employer's daughter intended to do now, it was far wiser to let Girondez go. There would always be time later on to settle his account.

Helen Forsythe was the first consideration. He must do nothing to jeopardize her

welfare. This Girondez reptile was the owner of the other half of the Hell's Bay concession.

With a sudden gesture of ironic politeness, Frank Craig indicated the companionway.

"You may go," he told Girondez. "But go for good. If I find you here pestering Miss Forsythe again, there will be trouble—for you!"

Manuel Girondez shrugged.

"It is of no use, the fighting, is it?" he agreed. "We who work in the same Bay should be friends."

The younger man ignored the implied question. This time his gesture was less polite as he indicated the companion.

Girondez took the hint.

Craig watched him carefully. He was not deceived by the smiling amiability that was on the half-breed's face as he crossed the saloon.

CHAPTER THREE

CRAIG MAKES A DECISION



CRAIG followed the other on deck. He leaned his elbows on the rail, and watched Girondez go down to his waiting dinghy. It went sadly against the grain to allow the other to go unharmed. But it had seemed to Craig the only thing to do.

Girondez, as his two Kanaka oarsmen rowed him away, looked up at Craig and waved politely.

"Slimy crawler!" Craig muttered, but to himself. Outwardly he remained imperturbable. The merest nod of his head was the only response he gave to the salute. When the dinghy had gone from earshot, Frank Craig was still at the rail staring at the blob of white that was the half-breed's face.

"I don't like you, my friend!" he murmured softly. "You're going to be a nuisance—or I'm a Dutchman."

"Then your nationality is quite safe!" a voice beside him said.

Helen Forsythe had come up on deck and, in her rubber-soled shoes, had walked to the rail beside him unheard. He had not noticed her presence before, as he had

been turned slightly toward the stern of the lugger, staring at the receding dinghy.

The girl nodded toward the shore.

"He's impossible," she said. "An obnoxious creature." Her voice was light, almost bantering. But Frank Craig knew that it was only with an effort that she made it so. He marveled that she managed to hold up at all. It was not four hours since her father had been buried.

As though reading his thoughts, Helen went on after a little pause:

"I'm going up there in a few minutes—" she nodded toward the town, where the cemetery, with its new-filled grave, lay. She put her hand on his arm. "I'd like you to come with me, if you will."

Craig felt a sudden glow of elation. The fact that the girl should turn to him in her trouble thrilled him. He had only known her a week, and yet she seemed to take it for granted that he was the one person on whom she could rely.

"I'll have them get the dinghy ready at once," he told her. "We'll be waiting for you just as soon as you like."

She thanked him with a smile, and went below to get ready for the trip ashore.

IT was as they were returning toward the beach along the sun-baked road from the cemetery that Helen spoke again of Girondez.

"It seems almost incredible," she said wonderingly. "Less than twenty-four hours after father's death. You'd think that even Girondez would have had more sense than that, wouldn't you?"

"What was his idea?" Craig asked hesitatingly.

Helen laughed bitterly. "Himself, of course. He thought he'd seize the opportunity of a lifetime. He thought that I was left alone and helpless—and that I'd be only too eager to fall into his arms for protection. That was all he wanted. To marry me!" Her eyes were hard and bright. "Marry him? I'd sooner marry a native. I told him so."

They fell silent again.

The dinghy, with the two Kanakas, was waiting for them and a minute later they were gliding out across the still water. The

schooner, the *Will o' the Wisp*, lay about half a mile from the shore, and the westering sun, almost directly behind it, threw the bare masts into black silhouette, two thin fingers pointing toward the sky.

The evening meal was ready when they came aboard, and with mixed feelings Craig made his toilet. He stood for nearly five minutes, brush and comb poised in his hands, staring unseeingly at his image in the glass. This meal, he was afraid, would be an ordeal. He must do his best to manufacture some small talk. It would never do to let Helen brood upon the tragedy of the day before. The tiny saloon with the accustomed table—but with one missing from it—would bring it all back to her more poignantly even than the graveside that afternoon had done.

But when, finally, he entered the saloon, he found Helen in her place and smiling a welcome to him. And throughout the meal it was she who did the talking and he who felt nervous and distrait. He was thinking of the last words that Girondez had spoken to her that afternoon. Rumors. Only to be expected, perhaps, in a little place, but none the less disturbing. They would have to come to some sort of decision.

He broached the subject nervously as they were drinking coffee out on deck.

"Why, I'm going to carry on," Helen told him. "I have to earn a living, and this is the only way I know. Besides, I could never face the prospect of working in some stuffy little office in a stuffy city—no, thank you! And I can't tell you how glad I am that you are here. It makes things so much easier for me. If I'd had to find someone now—" She shrugged.

Frank Craig tried to express the doubts that were in his mind. But he made a poor go of it, and at first Helen did not follow the drift of his words. Then, suddenly, she smiled. It was a smile that sent another thrill surging through Craig's veins.

"You surely aren't trying to hint that what that Girondez beast said is of any importance!" she asked. "Why, good heavens, it never occurred to me! And what if people do talk? Does it worry you?"

She turned to him with a curious intensity in her eyes. The sun had gone, and the *Will o' the Wisp* was wrapped in the gentle light of gloaming, so that the hour and the place seemed to have a strange air of brooding, indefinable mystery. It gave the question an imponderable significance; it made the answer, still to come, of paramount importance.

"Of course it worries me." Craig suddenly found his mind clear. The overwhelming sense of awkwardness, of embarrassment, left him and he was able at last to look into the eyes of the girl with no sense of intrusion. "Naturally, it worries me."

"Why?"

"*Why?* I can't let them go saying that sort of thing. The swine—they should know better! I don't know, I suppose I'll have to—"

He broke off disconsolately. There was a story behind his appearance a week ago in Broome. Helen's father had known it. Craig had insisted on his knowing, before he would take the older man's offer of employment. But Helen did not know—and she would possibly misconstrue the unhappiness that he felt at being forced to return to land, to be once more unemployed, to be driven, thanks to the unpleasantly venomous minds of a small town community, back to the miserable business of looking for work.

"You suppose you'll have to what?"

The girl's eyes were on him, curiously. She was wondering what thoughts were passing through his mind; wondering what it was that had suddenly plunged him into melancholy.

With an effort he roused himself. "I'll have to go ashore, Miss Forsythe," he told her simply. "Have to find another job. It's the only thing to do—you can see that, surely?"

"Because you're worrying about what that half-breed said? You think it's going to 'ruin my reputation?'" Her words were charged with mordant scorn, scorn that was directed, he knew, not at him, but at the people on shore who would think the things that Girondez had hinted of.

Although he did not speak, she read the

answer to her question in his eyes. Impulsively she put her hand on his arm.

"Please," she pleaded urgently. "Please—if that is your only reason for leaving, don't go. Lord! As if I care what people say! It's you and I who are concerned, isn't it?" Her eyes grew sadder again, intensely serious. "Well, then, who else should worry? Please, you must stay."

Her lip trembled and for an instant she saw him through a mist.

"You see, I've simply got to count on you. I can't go to Hell's Bay by myself, with only these natives—and I certainly won't try to get anyone from shore. So you see I'm absolutely stuck without you. And I'm certainly not going to insult you by trying to get some woman to 'chaperone' me. That would be a nice way to show my trust in you."

She broke off for a minute, and her eyes sought the slowly waking stars. She knew that her companion would not misconstrue the things that she had said to him; but she was afraid that his regard for her might prove too big an obstacle for his consent. She knew that what she suggested was, on the face of it, a little foolish, a direct flying in the face of the conventions—but, on the other hand, she was desperately anxious to carry on the pearling trade that she loved. And, as for the young man at her side, she would trust him implicitly.

If he could not see his way clear to stay with the *Will o' the Wisp* she did not know what she would do. With an impatient gesture she brushed the suggestion aside. Of course he would stay. He must realize that she trusted him, that she relied on him as she would on a brother.

"You'll stay and help me out—won't you?"

The words, half whispered, came to him through the silence of the night.

"Yes," he said slowly. "I'll stay. I'm glad you spoke like that. I knew you trusted me."

A GAIN the silence of the night came down on them. The waters lay black beneath the *Will o' the Wisp*, beneath and all around. Nearly a mile away a riding

light, set apart from the cluster near the shore, showed where another vessel rested, solitary, on the still waters.

It was the lugger of Manuel Girondez, the *Alicante*, but now, in the hush of night, it was separated from them by the infinity of the dark waters. The menace of Girondez, the uneasy feeling of trouble to come that he had stirred in both their hearts, was soothed to oblivion. They were aware only of each other.

Above them the stars grew to full brilliance, so that the sky became a velvet setting for the jewel case of Night. And low down on the horizon, its Pointers almost awash, the Southern Cross burned steadily.

Occasionally, from the shore, there came the faint sounds of music, and once a chorus of voices raised in a sea chanty. But the sounds were reedy, tenuous. They served only to emphasize the isolation of the *Will o' the Wisp*. The schooner lay aloof, distant from the shore and all that it contained; immune to all that might be said.

"You ought to buy a partnership," Helen said, after a while.

Craig came back to the present with a start.

"I would if I could, perhaps. But I'm broke. That was why I took this job in the first place."

"But you could buy it out of your—your salary," she suggested softly. "We would be on equal terms then. I don't like the idea—"

"Please!" Craig stopped her with a gesture. "I couldn't do that, I wouldn't dream of it. It would take me years. Besides, it will be better this way. And—I won't mind being your employee in the least."

Helen accepted the refusal with a little nod. It was what she had expected—and she was not disappointed.

Craig laughed suddenly.

"And now, Madame, what about some orders? When do we start? And where do we go?"

The girl sighed softly, and her eyes strayed for a moment toward the lights of the town. Then she squared her shoulders.

"Why not?" she said. "What point is

there in staying here? We'll start in the morning. At about eight o'clock."

She rose, but her eyes were looking out across the bay, and Frank Craig's eyes were on her, so that neither of them saw the patch of shadow that suddenly detached itself from the deeper shadows that the deck housing cast by their chairs. And by the time the girl turned to go to the saloon, the moving shadow had disappeared into the region of the forecandle.

Ten minutes later a dim black shape crept out from the shelter of the schooner and made toward the shore. Even if Helen had seen it, she would have taken no notice. The natives were allowed to come and go as they wished. For ten minutes the trail of phosphorescence that the canoe created still marked its line toward the shore. It was only when the cluster of shipping close in was reached that the wake curved slowly round, circling behind the larger craft until it was lost to sight, or the possibility of sight, from the *Will o' the Wisp*.

For ten more minutes the canoe lay motionless, as though hiding, behind a clumsy fore- and aft-rigged schooner.


Then, awakening to movement once more, it slid out toward the deeper waters. This time it marked its path toward the *Alicante*. The trail of phosphorescence it left might have been that of any craft. Thanks to the ten minutes' immobility behind the schooner, the canoe had lost its identity, even to the most suspicious eyes.

An hour later, the return journey was begun. The shadowy figure that later slipped aboard the *Will o' the Wisp* might have spared itself its infinite precautions. There was no one to see his return, and his companions in the forecandle knew nothing of his rendezvous. If they had, they would have cared not at all. The doings of their white masters were of no interest to them. If one of their number chose to take a hand, that was his look out. They would be as indifferent to any rewards it might bring, as to any punishment that might be the intriguer's only return for his labors.

The voyager crept in among his fellows. The schooner slept on.

CHAPTER FOUR

TEMO REFLECTS

 IN the forecandle of the *Will o' the Wisp* a figure squatted, motionless. It might have been a graven image. Temo, the Number One Boy, was at his station.

In a few minutes, now, his duties would begin. The entrance to Hell's Bay was guarded by shifting sand which, with each tide, heaped itself into shoals that never remained the same for twenty-four hours at a time. It was Temo's duty to detect the position of these shoals as the schooner came into the channel, and signal them to Helen at the wheel, so that she might steer clear.

But for the moment he was free. He was at liberty to allow his mind to wander where it chose. His eyes, dark and brooding, were on the placid stretch of water that could already be seen through the narrow inlet. Within a day now, he was thinking, the work of his fellows and himself would begin. They would be shooting like black meteors into the shell beds and bringing up with them the shell that gave their employer money.

His pupils contracted. Well, perhaps he would not have to work for so little very much longer. In there, beyond those shoals, there lay the *Alicante*—for the lugger had sailed from Broome less than an hour after the furtive visit of the canoe—and the white man who owned her had promised Temo money.

He would soon be able to earn it, too. Money—and a voyage that would bring him within only a little distance of his own homeland. The prospect was pleasing. A few days—a little while, as the man Girondet had said, to lull suspicion—and then events could take their plotted course.

It was of no concern to Temo that the one to suffer thereby would be the daughter of the man who had paid him his wages, and a bonus as well, each year for the last four years. That was no concern of his. The white folks would not have worried if Temo's mother or father had died; they did not even bother to wonder, in all probability, whether he had a mother.

Temo's eyes glittered. The owner of the *Alicante* had told him just how much value his new employer put upon his life. And Temo believed him.

As though to make the promised hour so much the closer, the Number One Boy rose to his feet, in the attitude of watching. They were still a mile from the shoals.

"He's a perfect treasure," Helen told Craig, who stood beside her at the wheel. "He's been with us for years. I don't know what I'd do without him now. Temo is the best diver we've ever had."

Under the stern, whorling between the stern and the rudder, the water gurgled and chuckled, as though frothing with amusement. . . .

FRANK CRAIG was held fascinated by the passage through the narrow entrance to Hell's Bay. Obeying the signals of the Number One Boy on the forecandle, Helen turned the wheel now to port, now to starboard, so that the *Will o' the Wisp* seemed to zigzag crazily.

The sails had been furlled and the schooner was making progress with the aid of her auxiliary, a crude oil engine that could give a maximum of eight knots, if pushed. The staccato of its exhaust rang out as though beating a tattoo of triumphant entry, and the sound was caught by the sandhills on either side and flung back to them. It was as though Hell's Bay beat forth a drumming roll of welcome.

The Bay itself was a mere lake, two miles wide and about four long, so far as Craig could judge. It formed almost an oval, and the entrance practically bisected the western side of it. Low sandhills lined the beach. Out beyond them there stretched a drab, dun-colored plain that finally lost itself in the distance. Blue and faint, almost invisible, a range of hills marked the northern limit of the plain, but elsewhere the flat ground seemed to stretch on toward infinity.

"It's a ghastly place in some ways," Helen said. "There's not a soul living within fifty miles of it anywhere. Not even aboriginals. They give it a wide berth, because it's supposed to be inhabited by devils of some sort. And there's no fresh

water. That's another reason, I suppose. We have to bring it with us. The result is, of course, that we can't stay longer than our supply lasts. But there's a small stream about a hundred miles north. Once or twice we've had to make for that, when we've been short."

It was certainly not a place to inspire admiration. Only the water was beautiful. And that, completely sheltered from the long easy swells of the Indian Ocean, lay like a mirror in its golden setting of sand.

The entrance passed, Helen turned the nose of the schooner south.

"This is our half," she told him. "The south head of the entrance is the limit, the dividing line. From there due east to the shore is the boundary. Girondez has the northern half." She broke off to study the *Alicante*, which lay close to the beach, at the further extremity of the oval. "He seems to be working a new bed," she went on. "For the last six months he has always anchored a mile or more nearer here."

A sudden gesture dismissed the *Alicante* and her owner and the problem of his sudden departure from Broome. Helen pointed to a buoy that was resting on the glossy surface.

"That's where we are going. There's a really rich bed there—so far as shells are concerned, I mean." A cloud came over her eyes again. It was not four weeks since she and her father had fixed the buoy.

Her father's words came back to her vividly. He had been unusually impressed by the quality of the shell they had been getting up. It had seemed to him that it was the most promising location they had ever had.

"We'll come back to it, Helen," he had said. "We'll come back and strike it lucky. I can feel it in my bones!"

He had been so full of optimism. For the first time in months he had known hope. They had been having, as he himself had put it, "a thin spin," the shell that they had been getting proving poor and barely profitable enough to pay their way. And then — just when things seemed brighter — She closed her eyes, as though to shut out the night when they had brought her father back to her, dead. . . .

She gritted her teeth and forced herself to continue.

"Father thought it the best ground we'd struck for a long time. I only hope it is!" She added, with a little grimace, "We can certainly do with a bit richer harvest than we've been having this last year or two."

CHAPTER FIVE

GIRONDEZ IS TOO QUIET



HILE Craig was helping with the mooring of the schooner, his mind was busy with thoughts of what might be waiting for them. On the trip from Broome, gliding across the sparkling ocean, Helen had told him many things about the pearling industry. To his astonishment, she had told him that it was not a ready means to wealth. He had been amazed to learn that the main stay of the industry was the "shell" that they brought up. "Mother of pearl," the world called it—and it was sold by the ton.

She had told him, too, that one good pearl in a year's diving in these waters was considered great good fortune. There were plenty of "blisters," of course. They looked like the real thing, until they were examined in the privacy of the saloon. Then they proved to be mere thin bubbles of mother of pearl, perhaps containing a tiny seed pearl in the cavity, but, as often as not, having nothing there but emptiness.

"Still," she had laughed, "it breaks the monotony. You never know when it's going to be the real thing. And Father was always very hopeful of Hell's Bay. He was always expecting to find a real gem."

It had been a time for confidences that stretch of sunlit days and jeweled nights, and Craig, in his turn, had talked, at first from a sense of duty to his employer—he felt that he could not sail under false colors — and then, later, because he found something particularly soothing in the quiet understanding that Helen Forsythe always gave him.

He had held nothing back. From earliest childhood days, through the days at school, on through the years of fear and agony and courage in France, on to the Staff job in India, with permanent Captain's rank;

and then on to the finale of his military career, when a High Command had needed a scapegoat to save its own skin, and a court martial had set him adrift, with the dubious consolation that his resignation had been accepted.

"A cowardly sop to their own consciences," Helen had said at that. And then suddenly, for a fleeting instant, she had laid her hand on his arm. "I'm glad you told me," she said gently. "I knew that, whatever it was, right from the first, it wasn't your fault that you were at a loose end."

That had given him courage to go on, to finish the little tragedy, vast in its importance to himself, but trite in its everyday occurrence. A plausible land agent in Perth had produced his financial ruin as readily as the High Command had staged his military downfall.

By the time the *Will o' the Wisp* had sighted the entrance to Hell's Bay there had been no secrets between them—except one. And that, as Craig reminded himself miserably a dozen times a day; was one that must remain a secret indefinitely. It was a secret that made life very difficult in many ways—but very pleasant.

It was later that day, when the evening meal was finished, and they were out on deck again, sipping their coffee, that Helen reverted to the question of the new ground they were to start fishing the following morning.

"It would be wonderful, wouldn't it?" she mused. "Just imagine bringing up a really good pearl—worth hundreds, I mean!" she laughed softly. "It's certainly about time, if the law of averages holds good. We've never had a really first-rate pearl yet. It would be some reward for opening them."

It had been the custom, she explained, on board the *Will o' the Wisp*, for her father and herself to open all the shells. He had always insisted on doing so, because he had always cherished the idea of some day finding a pearl that was going to be worth a small fortune—and he had had no desire for the crew to know anything about it.

"As likely as not they'd murder us in

our beds, if we ever did find one, and they knew about it," she added cheerfully. "I wouldn't trust them an inch then. They're all right, of course, so long as it's only shell that we get. They couldn't carry enough of that to make it worth their while. But with a pearl—that's an easily negotiable asset."

It was hard work, she went on to tell him, the business of opening the shells, and it would take him a while to get the knack of doing it quickly. And any seed pearls he found he was to hide as unostentatiously as possible—her father had always made it a rule not to examine them except in the privacy of the saloon, in the evening.

Frank Craig stayed on deck that night until late. He had the miserable conviction that they were somehow standing at the threshold of big events. The premonition made him restless, and he was still pacing the deck long after the lights on the distant *Alicante* had gone out.

There was no sound in the bay. Outside, the long rollers pounded gently on the beach, but the sound scarcely reached his ears. There was no breeze stirring, and the still surface of the bay held a mirror to the gleaming points of silver that decked the indigo sweep of sky above. When at last Craig turned in, it was with an odd little thrill of eagerness for the morrow.

HELEN'S prophecy proved to be only too true. By the end of the next day Craig felt as though he had been working a week without rest. Every muscle in his body ached, and his hands felt twice their usual size. But he made light of it, feeling almost ashamed that he should be so done up, when Helen seemed scarcely to have turned a hair. The next night, however, he found that his discomfort was less, and before a week had gone by, he was able to do his full day's work without any after effects.

It was monotonous. A mere mechanical, never ending repetition of the same movements hour after hour. And only once had there been anything to break the monotony. It was on the fifth day that he opened a shell and found a tiny seed pearl. Its value

was infinitesimal, but the finding of it gave him a little thrill of excitement. That evening, in the saloon, Helen examined it carefully.

"It's the same sort that father found here," she told him. "It's not quite the same as the average run of them—and it was that that made father so optimistic."

For a long while they discussed the pearl and its significance, and then Helen, with a little yawn, went to her cabin. Craig went up on deck.

Again the restless feeling pervaded him. He could not rid his mind of the idea that they had been under observation that evening. Once or twice, while they had been talking, he had been tempted to dash out on deck to investigate. But the impulse had seemed foolish; and, more important in his eyes, it would have worried Helen. It was wiser to keep his suspicions to himself.

Out across the silent waters the *Alicante* showed her position by two dim golden points that were the portholes of the saloon. For a long while, Craig stared at them. He wondered what was happening over there—what Girondez was doing, and what he was thinking. Since their arrival they had seen nothing of him. Craig had more than half expected that the half-breed would have been across before then. It seemed queer that they should hear nothing from him.

And yet, he asked himself impatiently, why should they? What was there for them to hear? There was no reason why Girondez should communicate with them. They had nothing in common, and he had been told plainly enough that he was not popular. Nevertheless, Craig worried. He could not imagine the half-breed lying down quietly under the rebuff he had been given.

Suddenly the lights went out on the *Alicante*. And with their obliteration the lugger lost her identity. She was merged in the darkness of the water.

Almost at the same moment, a movement on the fore-castle caught Craig's eye. Something sinister seemed to lurk in the furtive progress of the figure. Again he tried to laugh at his imaginings, to per-

suaude himself that it was only one of the crew returning to the fore-castle. Yet his uneasiness increased, inexplicably. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

SHARK!



HE next morning, as he and Helen sat opening the shells, Craig found himself able to laugh at his uneasiness, his jumpiness, of the night before.

In the bright sunlight that bathed the deck of the schooner, Hell's Bay lay sparkling in the warm caress of day, and a gentle breeze tempered the heat. The divers were cheerful, laughing and joking among themselves in the brief spells on deck.

For a while, Craig stood watching them, leaning on the rail, resting his arms and hands for a few minutes from the monotony of handling the shells. The divers were like so many brown comets, as they shot down through the crystal waters, a little trail of bubbles marking their passage. It was easy to see them, just like looking through plate glass, as they crawled on the bottom wrenching at the more resistant black ovals. The natives seemed to possess almost infinite lung power. It was almost as though they were amphibious, equally at home on land or in the sea. And their faces, as they rose to the surface again, showed no signs of distress. If he had stayed under water a third of the time that they did, he would have come to the surface gasping and panting like a stranded codfish!

But the day that had opened so peacefully, so reassuringly, was destined to prove one of excitement and danger.

Craig had scarcely returned to his work when the alarm broke out. A cry, high-pitched and anxious, broke into the desultory conversation that he and Helen were idly engaged in—a cry of warning.

Helen dropped her shell and sprang to her feet.

"Shark!" she cried.

Craig felt a thrill of horror run through him. What chance would any diver stand if he were caught groping and crawling on the bottom, while a grim, gray shape hov-

ared between him and the surface? With a fascinated horror clutching at his breath, he made his way to the rail. Helen had vanished into the saloon.

It was scarcely a second since the warning cry had rung out, but to Craig it seemed an aeon. He felt as though he were living through some horrible nightmare, where his feet were weighted with lead, and walking was a desperate effort. A moment later he learned the reason for Helen's sudden disappearance, but at that instant, as he stared into the still crystal water, he found himself wondering why she was not there with him.

About halfway between the surface and the floor of the bay, there floated, apparently indolent and indifferent, a long gray form whose fins moved leisurely. The shark was hovering, gloating over its prey. And down below, his face turned upward and a frozen horror distorting his features, one of the divers stared up at the grim ogre of the ocean that was waiting for him. Craig noticed, with an odd feeling of unreality, that the whites of the diver's eyes seemed to have obliterated the pupils. They were two large globes of stark, white terror!

It could not have been more than a second that he watched that tableau of tropic waters, but it seemed to him an age before a movement along the deck rail caught his eye. One of the natives was poised on the rail, knife in hand. It was Temo.

Craig held his breath. Temo was going to the other's rescue! It was stupendous—colossal courage! That slim brown form was voluntarily going to attack the long gray monster. He was going to attack the tiger of the seas in its own element!

The next instant the Intrepid Temo was shooting out from the rail in a long sweeping parabola that brought him to the surface of the water directly over the shark. With hardly a splash he broke the surface and shot, plummet-like, toward his objective, his hand, grasping the knife, outstretched before him. His action had been so quick, his dive and attack all in one continuous sweep, that the shark, still gloating on the prospective victim below, was taken unawares.

Craig saw the knife strike home. At the same moment the shark swirled suddenly, so that the knife missed the vulnerable spot and simply tore a long valley in the gray mass that suddenly had become galvanized to furious action. No further details were clearly visible. A crimson tinge was in the water, but whose blood it was Craig could not tell. He saw the diver shoot to the surface and strike out frenziedly toward the *Will o' the Wisp*. Then, an instant later, the head of Temo appeared above water, making for the schooner's side.

Suddenly Craig heard his own voice, harsh and anxious, half shout, half croak, a warning. The dark triangle of the shark's fin had appeared about ten yards away, and was speeding in the direction of Temo. "God!" the exclamation wrung itself from his lips. It was like being in a nightmare, where one stood helpless and impotent, watching disaster sweeping down.

And then, suddenly, startling the echoes with a staccato roar, a shot sounded, and the water where the fin showed became convulsed, frothing and bubbling, as the shark writhed and thrashed in wounded agony and impotence. Looking along the rail, Craig saw Helen, the gun still at her shoulder, her eyes still trained along the sights, watching the shark.

So while he had been standing impotently by, feeling powerless to help, Helen had completed the rescue of the diver—and of Temo!

A second shot was not needed. The two natives scrambled aboard safely and a moment later, as the water cleared slightly, they could see the shark, motionless, floating lifelessly on the water.

"Well, that's the end of the diving for today, anyway," Helen said, as Craig moved toward her. He marveled at her self-possession.

She laughed away the tentative praises of her marksmanship. "Just luck," she said. "I've had four and five shots sometimes before I've hit it. We lost one man that way about a year ago. Father and I were both firing at it, and couldn't get it. It got away safely in the end."

She shuddered. The shark had got away

unscathed, and had taken its victim also.

Although there was no more diving that day, there still remained plenty of shells to be opened. Craig and Helen were often nearly half a day behind the divers when the shells were more than usually easily collected.

"We'll do them after lunch," she suggested. "There's no hurry—and I don't feel inclined for it just now."

She called Temo to her and gave him a few words of praise. The Oriental's face remained impassive. He gave no sign that he either appreciated or scorned the praise. To Craig, used as he was to the ways of the native mind, it seemed that Temo was turning over some project in the scheming brain behind his inscrutable eyes. His face was too impassive. It gave Craig a feeling of uneasiness. But when he voiced the idea to Helen, she laughed.

"Temo's been with us for years, Frank," she told him. "I'd trust him before any others of the crew."

And with that Frank Craig had to be satisfied. But he made the mental reservation that he would keep his eye on the Number One Boy. . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

FOR AN OPALESCENT BAUBLE

IT was later that day, nearly five o'clock, that the second surprise came. Craig and Helen were once more occupied with their monotonous task of opening the shells.

Helen had been talking inconsequentially as she worked; suddenly she broke off her idle chatter with a little gasp.

"Nothing much," she told Craig, in answer to his look of inquiry. "Just pricked my finger. I'll be back in a minute." She raised her voice so that it carried to the fore-castle, where Temo, solitary as was his wont, sat staring impassively at the barren stretches of sand hills that shimmered under the rays of the westering sun. "Nothing much; just a prick. I think I'll slip down and put some iodine on it. These shells seem to have some sort of germ in them. Cuts and scratches often go septic."

Craig, with a murmur of sympathy, resumed his work, and thought no more about it. He scarcely noticed that Helen, when she came back a few minutes later, was not as calm as usual. But, later that evening, as they sat at the table, folding their napkins preparatory to going on deck for coffee, Helen suddenly sprang up, and, going to the door, locked it. Then she disappeared in the direction of her cabin.

She returned a moment later, holding out an object lying in her hand. For a moment Craig stared at it, unable to believe his eyes. Then he gasped.

"Good Lord, where did that come from?"

Helen chuckled at his astonishment.

"That was when I pricked my finger!" she told him. "I found it then. That's really why I went below. I didn't dare to risk trying to hide it about me anywhere, with Temo sitting on the fore-castle in full view of us."

She whisked off the bandage and exhibited a finger unscratched and unadorned with iodine. Then, laying the pearl on the table, she replaced the bandage.

"I'll have to keep up the pretense for a day or so," she explained. "Wouldn't do to let them have any cause for suspicion."

Craig took the pearl almost reverently. "Isn't it a beauty?" Helen murmured, bending over to examine it with him. Craig could feel the faint caress of a stray wisp of hair brushing lightly against his cheek. He felt a strange sense of exhilaration. "The pearl, of course," he told himself mendaciously, and hoped that Helen would continue looking at the gem for hours.

"Isn't it a beauty!" she repeated, in an awed voice. It seemed to her that the pearl was, indeed, too good to be true. "I tell you I nearly put the show away by shouting with joy when I saw it. It's just what father was always hoping for. It's worth thousands."

Craig rolled the creamy, opalescent bauble in his palm.

"It doesn't look much, does it?" he commented musingly. "And yet people pay fortunes for things like it."

Helen derided his masculine point of view.

"Any woman would rather have one or two of those than anything else, practically, that you could name to her," she told him. "Lord only knows why! And yet they fascinate me, too—even though I know the messy way they are got."

She took the pearl from him.

"You mustn't look at it too long," she cautioned. "You might come under the spell. I'd hate to be murdered in my bed for it!"

Her jesting words were more truth than she dreamed. At least one life was to be lost that night on account of the opalescent sphere. . . .

TEN minutes later they were sitting up on deck, drinking coffee. Their talk and behavior were casual. There was nothing about them to indicate that they shared a secret; that they two alone knew that a small fortune lay hidden away safely behind a board in the saloon.

Nor in the attitude of Temo, squatted upon the fore-castle head, was there anything to indicate that his thoughts were other than as usual. He stared as impassively as ever toward the silent sand hills, and his expressionless features might have been those of some queer pagon idol, exiled from its resting place, and mourning its empty niche in some queer temple of mystery.

Yet twenty minutes later, as darkness settled upon the schooner, blotting out all but vague outlines of masts and spars, Temo rose silently from his meditations and moved slowly, and more silently than the flitting shadows, until he was out of the line of vision of the white people. They did not notice even that he had moved.

A moment later a slim brown form slid softly into the dark waters, and noiselessly, with slow furtive strokes that left the quiet surface undisturbed, swam invisibly toward the distant *Alicante*.

An hour later, Temo was in the saloon of the *Alicante*, his slim brown body still gleaming with the waters of Hell's Bay.

Manuel Girondez was nodding slowly and thoughtfully. There was an air of infinite satisfaction about him. The news that Temo had brought him was good. It helped

Girondez to a decision. He would act that night. A plan had been forming in his fertile brain for some time. But to get a pearl as well—that was unprecedented good fortune.

He walked to the door and called some orders up the companionway. Then, with a slightly tremulous hand, he poured himself a glass of whisky and luke-warm water.

Now that the actual time for carrying out his plan had arrived, he felt a vague sense of agitation. But the presence of the pearl on the Forsythe schooner was an inducement that overcame any vague scruples that he might have had.

CHAPTER EIGHT

TRAITOR BAIT

ELEN and Craig sat talking on deck long after they had finished their coffee. The conversation was desultory, spasmodic almost, but not because of boredom, or of that awkward self-consciousness that sometimes comes upon two young people of opposite sexes who find themselves alone together in romantic and exotic settings. Rather, they both had that pleasant feeling of companionship that makes conversation unnecessary.

They found pleasure in the long silences that fell. Silences that were broken only by the soft lapping of the waters against the side of the schooner, and emphasized, rather than interrupted, by the thin, reedy music that came to them from the fore-castle. Silences that were none the less eloquent of thoughts unspoken. Thoughts that were easy for both of them to read.

It was very pleasant to sit out there under the blazing stars, lulled by the distant faint crooning of the ocean on the outer beach.

It was a night for romance. From the fore-castle there came to them the faint notes of plaintive melodies dear to the heart of the Kanaka. Muted melodies in minor keys. The crew, within the privacy of their quarters, were making concert. But the sounds, as though muted in reverence for the peace and glory of the night,

seemed almost ethereal. Far away, two yellow points of light against the black waters of the bay, the saloon portholes of the *Alicante* glowed faintly. They added a touch of humanity, of companionship; the *Will o' the Wisp* was not quite alone.

It was Helen who at last broke one of the long companionable silences.

"Listen!" she whispered. "There's a boat coming. A rowing boat."

Sixty seconds elapsed before Craig, straining his ears, could detect the sounds that Helen heard. They came faintly across the waters, and from the direction of the *Alicante*.

As the boat drew nearer, it was obvious that the rowers were hurrying. It was no leisurely evening amble across the waters that brought the newcomers to the *Will o' the Wisp*.

A few moments later the boat came into view. A patch of pallid whiteness resolved itself into the features of Manuel Girondez, in the stern. The half-breed's face was lifted toward the man and the girl, who had moved to the rail as though sensing trouble. They could see that his expression was anxious.

The dinghy came alongside, and Girondez's voice rose to them, eager, troubled. His words were addressed to Craig, almost humbly. Would Señor Craig come with him at once to the *Alicante*? A man was dying there. His best diver. He had been attacked that afternoon by a shark, and his employer was at his wits end what to do next for him.

Manuel Girondez discreetly regretted that circumstances had caused him to force his presence where it might not be too welcome, but they would understand, of course, that in a case like this, in the cause of humanity, such intrusion must surely be overlooked. Between them, they might be able to do something for the unfortunate native. And, in any case, whether the other would come or not, he would like to borrow some bandages and cotton wool. His own supplies had run low. It was criminal of him, of course, but he had neglected to replenish his stock at Broome.

"We'll both come," Helen said impulsively. The memory of their own encounter

with a shark that morning gave an added significance to the sufferings of the native on the *Alicante*. "I'll go down and get the things now. I've some morphia down there, too! We always keep a little aboard."

She disappeared from sight, leaving the two men alone.

"It would be better," Girondez said apologetically, "if the Señorita did not come, I think. The man is horribly torn, and besides—" Two outspread hands demonstrated the indelicacy of Helen's going aboard the *Alicante*, whose owner had so insulted her only such a short time ago.

It seemed to Craig, also, that it would be better if Helen did not go. He shrank from the thought of her being compelled to witness the unpleasant details of the treatment that he might have to give the victim of the shark. He followed her into the saloon.

"I'd much rather come with you, Frank," she told him. There was a little devil of doubt and suspicion lurking at the back of her mind, yet she hesitated to put it into words—it was too ridiculous! There was nothing to do but let him go alone if he insisted. After all, there was nothing that she could do that the two men could not do equally well. And there was the pearl! She did not relish the prospect of leaving that unguarded, even though it was well concealed.

"But be careful, Frank!" she urged, her consent given to staying behind.

"Good Lord, there's nothing to worry about!" he said. "There's nothing at all to worry about. The shark's not on board, you know!" he added, with a smile.

Helen smiled too, but there was little amusement in her heart. She could not rid herself of the feeling that things were not all as they should be. She tried to shrug off that feeling, but there was still a vague uneasiness in her mind as she watched Craig put off with Girondez in the dinghy.

ON the way across the half-breed gave Craig a vivid description of the injuries that the shark's victim had received. He seemed particularly anxious to know whether Craig thought that he had done all that might have been done.

Craig thought that there was little of anything that could be done, and he decided that his presence was desired more from the point of view of his being a witness to the cause of death of the native than from any prospect of help that he might be able to give. Still, he reflected, the morphia might do some good.

"I hope to heaven we're in time!" Girondez exclaimed as they drew in to the side of the *Alicante*. He cursed at the native rowers because they were slow in making the lugger's side, and he led the way aboard, in his haste leaving Craig to carry up the dressings and medicines that they had brought with them.


"This way!" Girondez hurried toward the companion, head turned over his shoulder to see that the other was following quickly. "I've got the poor devil in the saloon. Couldn't let him stay in the fore-castle; the natives live like pigs down there!"

Girondez opened the door of the saloon and waited for his companion to enter. Unhesitatingly Craig walked past the half-breed.

Then, suddenly, he felt a push from behind, a heavy, compelling push that sent him stumbling into the saloon. There was a sudden, jarring, nerve-jolting blow on his head and he felt himself falling, falling into a bottomless pit, black as night—an aching, throbbing blackness that seemed to seize him eagerly, engulfing him, blotting out consciousness. . . .

CHAPTER NINE

INTERVIEW OF TERROR

 ELEN watched the boat until it was lost in the night. Even after her eyes could no longer see the boat itself, the sound of the creaking rowlocks came back to her across the still waters. Sound carried far over that quiet, peaceful bay.

She could not rid herself of an uneasiness that had sprung to being with the appearance of the half-breed. She tried to laugh herself out of her depression, telling herself that it was only imagination, that the suspicions she still harbored of

the half-breed's share in her father's death had jaundiced her outlook. But her efforts were not successful. As the minutes dragged by she grew more and more restless. She went down to the saloon and tried to read, but the words seemed meaningless, and at the end of ten minutes she abandoned the effort. It was hopeless. She could not rest; there was trouble brewing.

Uneasily, she went up on deck again. Surely, she thought, Frank would not have to stay over there very long. He might be returning at any minute now. Perhaps the boat was already on its way back. She strained her eyes through the darkness, but she could see nothing save the two golden points of light that marked the *Alicante* and its saloon portholes. They shone steadily, reassuringly, like two stars set in the sky. It was ridiculous to worry, she told herself again. As if anything could happen!

In the fore-castle the natives were making concert again. They never seemed to weary of their dirgelike melodies. She wondered what the ready notes that filtered out through the closed door were meant to represent. Their music was like the natives themselves: remote, incomprehensible to the ear of civilization. She found herself listening with more interest than she had ever felt before. It was as though she hoped to find the answer to her disquietude, so inexplicable, in the mystery of the music.

And then, suddenly, she became aware of sounds on the quiet water. The creak of rowlocks. Thank God! The boat was coming back again.

She ran to the rail and leaned over, peering out into the night. A moment later she could distinguish the faint shadow of the boat, moving as a denser shadow on the black waters.

But there was only one white man in the boat—and it was not Frank!

"What is it?" she called anxiously.

"It's all right, Señorita Forsythe." The half-breed's voice came to her through the darkness, suave and reassuring. "It's quite all right. He's still alive—" A good jest, that one! He chuckled to himself. "He's doing fairly well. But the young man forgot the morphia—"

Helen stared down at the face peering

up at her. She had no eyes for anything else. She did not give a thought to the natives who were at the oars, and thereby she failed to see that which would have put her on her guard, and made her suspicious concrete reality. Temo, her Number One Boy, was rowing stroke!

The boat came gently to rest beside the schooner. Girondez was on the deck almost before Helen realized that he had moved at all.

"I know just where he left it," he told her, his voice a little rough, as was only to be expected in view of the urgency of his mission. He made his way toward the saloon companion, and Helen, willy-nilly, followed. She did not see the slim brown form of Temo climb furtively over the rail, nor did she hear him stepping softly and barefooted, behind her as she followed Girondez to the saloon.

Girondez walked to the table.

"He said he left it here!" he exclaimed, looking up at Helen. His eyes strayed for a moment behind her—and she saw him nod.

A sudden overwhelming conviction of danger rushed to her consciousness, and as she heard the door close softly behind her and the faint click of the lock as the key turned, she stiffened. Her eyes, dilated and brilliant with sudden fear, demanded an explanation.

Girondez smiled, but there was little mirth in the smile, and Helen felt the chill of horror. He nodded as though well satisfied.

"Very nicely done!" he remarked. A revolver had suddenly appeared in his right hand, and he toyed with it as he continued speaking.

"Now, my dear little Helen, you and I are going to have a talk—a *conversazione*."

"Where is Frank?" The question came haltingly from lips suddenly grown white.

Girondez chuckled, but it was not a reassuring laugh. Any merriment that was in it boded ill for Frank Craig.

"He is quite safe, my dear—oh, perfectly safe!" Again that unpleasant chuckle. "He is sleeping peacefully. Quite peacefully."

"Brute!" Helen's self-control was com-

ing back, and with it, a glimmering of the truth. "There *was* no shark; there is no one ill on board your boat! It was all a lie, a trick!"

Girondez bowed ironically.

"Correct, my Señorita!" His voice was mocking. "But how charming it was of the young man to accompany me! It made things so much easier. I really owe him a debt of gratitude for that. But there are more pleasant things to talk of, Señorita—more pleasant things, and more pleasant people. You and me, for instance." The half-breed spread his hands expressively. What could conceivably be more pleasant than that?

"I don't know what you expect to gain by all this foolery!" she said bitingly. "Have you killed Frank?"

Girondez shook his head.

"Much as I regret the fact, I have not," he told her. "I feel that that young man would be better dead—but I do not feel disposed to have his blood upon my hands."

Helen drew a deep sigh of relief, but she did not let the other see her sudden renewal of hope. Instead:

"You feel that the blood of my father is sufficient?" she said.

IF ever she had had any doubts as to Girondez's complicity in the killing of her father, they were banished then. Guilt stood out in every line of the man's face. Then with an obvious effort, he controlled himself.

"The dear Señorita would deign to be humorous, it appears," he murmured softly. "Well—a sense of humor will doubtless help her while she is becoming accustomed to being the Señora Girondez!" He bowed low at the words, his beady eyes watching her expression. A moment later he added, "It is useless for you to scream, my dear Helen. In the first place, your crew could not hear you. In the second, even if they could, they could do nothing, because by now they are locked in their own evil-smelling fore-castle."

He cocked his head as though listening. "I think I hear my ally coming back now," he went on. "Come in!" he called, as a knock sounded. "He is discreet, my ally!"

Girondez added. "He would not dream of interrupting a tête-à-tête unceremoniously!"

The half-breed chuckled, and nodded approvingly as the Number One Boy appeared on the threshold. The native locked the door on the inside this time, and placed the key on the table. He laid another one beside it. Helen did not need to be told that it was the key to the padlock with which the fore-castle had been closed against egress by the crew.

Suddenly she turned on Temo.

"Fool!" she said, with biting scorn. "What good will this do you? When we return to Broome, you will go to prison!"

Girondez laughed softly.

"You need take no notice, my good Temo. We do not return to Broome!" He nodded toward the inner door of the saloon, which gave admittance to the cabins. "Wait in there, Temo!"

Girondez followed the Number One Boy, shepherding him through the doorway. Then, with a chuckle, he pulled the door to, and turned the key in the lock.

"Not that I think that Temo would be indiscreet," he said, "but one never can tell. It was a good idea, Helen, trying to frighten him. It shows that you have brains. I am glad of that; we shall get on so much better together. But you could not hope to frighten Temo very much. You see, I have promised him quite a little fortune—in proportion to his ideas of wealth, that is—and also his freedom and safety. We shall drop him at Mano-Lao."

He broke off with a quizzical glance at Helen, but she returned the look scornfully.

"I gave you credit for more common sense," she said. "You surely do not think that you are going to be able to do anything rash and escape the consequences?"

Girondez's eyes suddenly glittered. Time was passing, and he wished to get back to the lugger. It was his purpose to be out of Hell's Bay before midnight.

"I think you will find that I shall be safe enough, Señorita," he sneered. "You will, of course, promise to keep silent—"

"I will *not*!" The words sprang staccato to Helen's lips. "You fool! Unspeakable half-caste!"

THE thrust went home, but Girondez managed to keep control of his temper. He answered her in a suave voice that struck terror to her heart.

"But I think that you will, my dear, so very dear Helen. There are ways of getting promises. It is not pleasant to see a young man being deprived of his fingers. The—h'm—proceeding is regarded as quite a painful one. I am quite certain that before the second one is half off, you will be only too eager to promise *anything*!"

Helen stared at him in horror. It was incredible. The man must have lost his reason. Abduction—and torture!

And yet, there was no glint of madness in the half-breed's eyes as he smiled at her sardonically. He was sane, coldly, calmly sane. He would not hesitate to use any means by which he thought that he might extract from her the promise that he sought.

He chuckled as he read the fear in his captive's eye.

"That makes a difference, does it not, Señorita? You would not care to see the dear boy tortured? No! And now—let us be going. But first, of course, you will tell me where the pearl is."

"Pearl?" Helen stared at him in well simulated astonishment. "What pearl? What are you talking about?"

The half-breed shook his head humorously, almost sympathetically.

"It won't work," he told her. "The good Temo saw you examining it today, and from his description, it seemed a good one—a very good one."

He paused. He was deriving considerable amusement from this interview. He had the haughty, unapproachable Helen so very cleverly in his power. His word was absolute. A mere mention of torturing Frank Craig—that was all that was needed to bring her to her senses!

"Well, my dear Helen?"

The girl seemed to wake as from a trance. It was with a little start that she brought her eyes back to the half-caste. She had been staring unseeingly at the door, overwhelmed by this extra catastrophe, the news that Girondez knew of the pearl—and, to her astonishment and sudden hope, she had seen the handle turn, cautiously.

There was someone outside—someone who was being careful not to attract the attention of the occupants of the saloon to the stealthy attempt to open the door.

CHAPTER TEN

THE CHALLENGE

THE blow that had blotted out consciousness for Frank Craig had not found its mark as accurately as it might have done—or as Girondez had thought. Which was unfortunate for the half-breed.

Secure in his belief in the efficacy of his aim, Girondez had not been as careful as he might have been in the tying up of the unconscious man, and, in his eagerness to get back to the *Will o' the Wisp*, had given only scant orders to the guard whom he had set to watch at the door of the saloon.

Actually, in point of time, it was not five minutes after Girondez had left that Craig's senses began slowly to filter back to him through the mists of unconsciousness. But as he lay bound upon the floor of the saloon, it seemed to him that it might have been hours. It was only a glance at the clock that brought to him the realization that so little time had elapsed.

The knowledge was a spur to his efforts. Girondez must be nearly on board the *Will o' the Wisp*, and Helen would be there alone, unprotected save for the native crew—a protection more likely to be conspicuous by its absence than by its presence—and at the mercy of the half-breed.

Repressing his first impulse to tug madly at his bonds, he cautiously investigated their possibilities. To his amazement and delight he found that there was the faintest suspicion of "give" in them. Three minutes of patient wriggling found them appreciably looser, and in less than ten minutes after full consciousness had come back to him, Frank Craig was free. Free of his bonds—but that was all. He was still aboard the *Alicante*, and it was not in the least likely that he had been left unguarded.

Creeping to the door, he listened. From the other side of the panel there came the sound of faint movement. The guard—one of the natives doubtless—tapping the

rhythm of some quaint melody upon the floor. A harmless enough way of passing the time, but one of inestimable value as a confirmation of a prisoner's doubts.

Craig did not bother to try the door. It would be locked, and even if it were not, there would be little hope of escape that way. He crept back to the center of the saloon and sat down to think. He had to find some other means of egress—and that as quickly as possible!

The portholes were out of the question. But there was a door at the other end of the saloon leading, Craig decided, to the half-breed's sleeping quarters. He tiptoed toward it. A moment later his heart gave a bound of exhilaration as he discovered that Girondez had neglected to lock it. But perhaps, he reminded himself pessimistically, there was no need to lock it. Probably there was no chance of escaping that way.

If the worst came to the worst, he would have to think of some ruse by which he might persuade the guard outside the door of the saloon to open the door. Just how that might be managed he did not bother to ponder at that moment.

The door through which he passed led into an alleyway, off which two other doors opened. The light from the lamp in the saloon gave just sufficient illumination to see dimly. The first of the two doors yielded a poor result. It was obviously the door to Girondez's sleeping quarters, and there was no chance of escape there. Craig turned his attention to the other door.

This opened also into a cabin, in which Craig could see a couple of bunks. It was obvious that they were not used for their intended purpose. The cabin was a kind of personal storeroom and—

Craig gave a little whistle of astonishment and excitement. Two things he could discern through the dim light pleased his eyes. The first was a skylight let into the ceiling, the second a revolver. It was the work of three seconds to ascertain that it was loaded. Craig slipped it gratefully into his pocket and turned to the skylight.

"Almost too easy!" he told himself, as he climbed on to the bunk and undid the bolt. "It's sure to be bolted on the outside too!"

But it was not. It opened easily—inwards—and for that Craig offered a little prayer of thanks. If it had opened the other way, there would doubtless have been an unavoidable noise when it fell back on the deck. As it was, there was no sound save for a faint creak. Craig managed to climb through without undue difficulty, and a moment's breathless listening told him that, so far, all was quiet and his escape had not been noticed.

He found that he was on the roof of the deck housing almost as far aft as the wheel. Finding all clear, he began cautiously to reconnoiter. He had noticed when they came aboard that there was a craft of some sort, probably a canoe, lying in the water at the lugger's stern, and he prayed that it would still be there.

"My lucky night!" he decided cheerfully, as he picked out the dark outline in the water, and it was only after a moment's consideration that he added grimly—"so far!"

With infinite caution he lowered himself into the canoe. His eager hands found a paddle lying on the floor, and a moment later he was gliding stealthily away from the *Alicante*, wielding the paddle cautiously, so as to create no noise.

WHEN at last he drew near the *Will o' the Wisp*, he slackened his speed. He thanked his lucky stars that natives must sing no matter where they are. The faint notes, muted though they were, reached him from the crew of Girondez's cutter, where it lay alongside the schooner.

Making a wide detour, Craig managed to come alongside from the opposite quarter, and the unchanging tenor of the natives' singing told him that his presence was unknown. The schooner herself was quiet. But to Craig her stillness seemed sinister, a tranquility full of portent. He would rather, a hundred times, he told himself, have heard the sounds of turmoil.

His feet, clad only in thin socks, made no sound as he crept along the deck. With unerring instinct he made for the saloon. Some seventh sense warned him that it would be foolish to rush in, and he stood for a moment, crouching down, his ear to

the keyhole. Voices came clearly to him from the other side, and as he softly tried the handle of the door, he could hear the half-breed speaking.

"Well, my dear Helen?"

They were the words that had brought Helen back from her trance of amazement, as she had seen the handle of the door turning.

For a moment she made no answer. She was weighing the possibilities, estimating the potentialities of that turning handle. There was just a chance, the very barest of wild hopes, that it might be Frank Craig, come, in some miraculous way, to the rescue. In any case, friend or foe, she could not see that she stood to lose anything. And there was just the possibility.

She decided to act as though it were reality. To do so could do no harm—and if Frank were really there, she could manage to convey to him some information—and assistance as well. So far as she knew, if it were Frank, he would be unarmed.

She stared contemptuously at Girondez. Now that there was the possibility of rescue, her courage and self-control were reinforced a hundredfold.

"Is that the way you generally treat women?" she asked, and her words cut through even the sneering amusement of Girondez. "I suppose you are all the same, you half-breeds! Afraid of even a woman unless you have a gun or a knife in your hand!"

Through the door Craig could hear the snarl of anger that sprang from the half-breed's lips.

"Will you promise to listen to reason if I put it away?" The half-breed's voice was doubtful, mistrustful of this steely-eyed girl who defied him. "You'll tell me where the pearl is?"

"What else can I do?" she said, with a shrug. "You've got me just where you want me, haven't you? Just you and I—and yet you must wave that revolver about. Anyone would think that Frank was just outside! Even if he were, I'd tell him not to come in until I called for him!"

The half-breed laughed softly, as though the realization of his own temporary omniscience had been restored by her words.

"The accursed Señor Craig won't be 'just outside' anything for a long while, my dear," he told her. "Inside, more likely! Inside a nice length of canvas and two lead bars! And—" his voice grew unctuously teasing—"if you're very nice to me, we might even put a flag round the canvas!"

ON the other side of the door Frank Craig clenched his hands. His fingers were itching to be at the half-breed's throat. But Helen's words had given him the hint that she hoped he actually was outside, and that she was playing her cards with that idea in mind. Those words about his waiting until she called could scarcely be purely accidental.

With an effort he forced himself to immobility. The rôle of silent listener while Helen fought a lone hand was one that irked him to distraction, but for the present there was no other rôle for him to take. But as soon as he got his hands on the half-breed—!

"I suppose you'd be afraid to take a sporting chance—wouldn't you?"

Helen's words were as unexpected to Craig as they were to Girondez. The half-breed stared at her in astonishment, trying to divine her meaning. Helen stared at the revolver.

"You would be afraid to unload that and put it on the table," she went on. "You'd be afraid to risk a fight with me!"

Girondez's eyes glistened. The idea of having her in his arms, even in a struggle, appealed to him. He failed to see the little glint of uncontrollable excitement and eagerness in the girl's eyes as he laughed and started to unload the revolver. With one eye cocked warily on her, he laid the empty weapon and the cartridges on the table.

"Is it quite unloaded?" Helen asked.

"Yes. See!" For proof he pulled the trigger half a dozen times. A harmless clicking was the only response. He threw the revolver back on the table and advanced.

"A little fight," he murmured.

The gleam in his eyes made Helen shiver with repulsion, but she showed nothing of her fears as she stared contemptuously at Girondez, mocking him, daring him.

Girondez followed her as she backed away. Helen saw to it that she was well out of line of the door, just in case—Girondez's greedy eyes did not leave her for a moment. She backed until she had reached the further corner of the saloon, and then, standing at bay, she waited. Girondez came on eagerly.

"Ah!" he said. "The fight! It will but make the caresses that follow so much more pleasant, will it not?"

She felt his breath hot on her cheek and his hands rough on her shoulders. With a shudder she let him come still closer, until his arms were about her. Then, suddenly, twisting her arms about his neck and locking her fingers, she called:

"Now, Frank! Burst in the door! Quickly!"

The last word came in a sudden gasping scream as the half-breed, realizing that he had been fooled, tried to free himself from her clinging arms.

"Are you well away from the door?" Frank's voice came from outside. "I'm going to shoot the lock in! Are you well away?"

Girondez was struggling like a maniac now, but she managed to gasp a "Yes!" that was more than half a cry of pain.

There followed the muffled sound of a shot. At the same moment Helen felt a shooting pain in her side, and then, as Girondez, freeing his head from her arms, pushed her back so that his next blow might have more force than the first one, she saw the door burst open and Frank Craig, the still smoking revolver in his hand, framed in the portal. Then Girondez's fist crashed against the side of her jaw and she felt herself falling.

"You damned swine!" Craig stared at the other for a moment in horror and disgust. His eyes blazed with a sudden fire of hatred. To hit a woman!

He advanced grimly, a cold, implacable light in his eyes; a light that was baleful, a light that was far more menacing than the anger that had blazed in them a moment ago. The half-breed cringed. As he commenced to back away, Craig stopped him with a command that rang out with all the staccato abruptness of a pistol shot:

"Stand still!"

Craig covered him with his revolver. Girondez paused, irresolute, afraid to stay there, almost within arm's length of his enemy, afraid to move away lest the menace of that blue steel barrel flame death.

"Helen!" Craig's voice was urgent with anxiety.

Helen forced herself to speak, although the mists of unconsciousness were still hovering close about her, and her head was throbbing, her ears ringing with hammer-like pulses that pounded unceasingly. With each breath an agonizing needle of red-hot pain shot through her head.

"I'm—all right," she managed to whisper, and, with a gigantic effort, got to her feet, braced against the wall. "Don't—kill him!"

Craig did not take his eyes from the half-breed as he spoke to her.

"Sit down for a few minutes," he said. "Get yourself a little brandy. I want you to steady up if you can. Only for a few minutes, while I deal with this *swine!*"

Helen obeyed his instructions, and after five minutes rest, said she was fit enough.

"I want you to take this revolver," Craig said. During the whole time that Helen had been resting, his eyes had never once left the half-breed. "Take this revolver—but don't use it unless you have to. I'm going to teach this rotter a lesson that he won't forget in a hurry!"

HE ordered Girondez back half a dozen paces. Then, as Helen came to his side, he handed her the revolver. Slowly, very deliberately, he rolled up his sleeves.

"Now—you crawling wretch—are you going to fight, or are you going to take it lying down?"

Manuel Girondez licked his dry lips. His plans had miscarried horribly. Something had gone wrong on board the *Alicante*. Even as he stared uneasily at the man waiting for him to answer his question, he was thinking of the revenge that he would have upon the native he had left to guard the prisoner—if ever he got back to the *Alicante!*

He turned his eyes toward Helen. She had retreated to the other side of the saloon, but the revolver was still covering him, and

he knew that she would not miss him if she had to shoot. There was little chance of escape.

He moistened his dry lips. There was only one thing to do. He had to fight. Well, then, he would do his best to win. He'd show this cocksure young Englishman that he wasn't such an almighty terror as he thought he was. He, Manuel Girondez, would put the young whippersnapper in his place!

Craig nodded approvingly as Girondez rolled up his sleeves.

"A fair fight, and no favor," he announced. "Miss Forsythe won't use the revolver unless she has to." He addressed himself to Helen, but his eyes held those of the half-breed alertly. He was taking no chance of a sudden attack before he had laid down the rules by which they would fight.

"I don't want you to do anything, Helen," he said, "but protect yourself—or to stop any foul play on this fool's part. If he wins in fair fight, he's free to go. But see that he goes straight—don't take any risk with him. Shoot him if you think there's the slightest danger. That's if he wins, I mean." Craig laughed grimly. "Not that he will! I'm going to see to that."

He paused for a moment, eyeing the half-breed quizzically. "You must have had your crew well instructed in the possibilities," he went on. "Told them that the lady might give trouble, eh? That they were not to worry if they heard a shot—because you had the only revolver!" He laughed again. "Just as well, perhaps. It would have been a pity to have spoiled our little fight, wouldn't it?"

Girondez snarled. Mentally he was cursing himself for a fool. He had no one but himself to thank for his plight. If he hadn't been so cocksure—I And if he hadn't been so greedily anxious to keep his crew from sharing in the pearl! His greed was more than likely making him lose everything.

Craig moved toward him. His eyes were like flint.

"You know the rules," he said grimly. "As long as you stick to them, you'll be all right—as far as Miss Forsythe is concerned, I mean! She won't shoot unless you try any of your dirty little tricks."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

INTERVAL OF FURY

THE next five minutes was a time that none of them was likely to forget to their dying day. To Frank Craig it was an interlude of grim enjoyment, as he pounded and battered the half-breed. To his astonishment Girondez put up a good fight. "Like a rat in a corner," Craig found time to think.

It was by no means a one-sided affair. Craig had to bring all his skill to bear against the desperate rushes of Girondez, and more than once he felt a dull, solid pain as the half-breed's fists found a target. But through it all there ran the thrill of satisfaction; he was winning, slowly but surely.

To Girondez it was an interlude of hatred and desperate hoping against hope. If only he could manage to win! To beat this young whippersnapper whose lips smiled slightly all the while and whose eyes were cool and calculating! Their very coolness drove the half-breed to a frenzy. It would have delighted him, raised him to an ecstasy of devilish bliss, if only he might have used—as he had learned to do in his youth—his feet, and his teeth, and his knife! But he knew better than to let those thoughts hold sway. He knew that Helen Forsythe would shoot him like a dog if he tried.

To Helen, it was an interlude of fear. She dreaded the possibility of Frank's being unable to overcome the other. She knew that Girondez was crazy with desperation and thwarted hopes. Ordinarily she would have had no fear of the outcome, but that night—! She forced herself to stop thinking; to watch silently and alertly. In her heart she rather hoped that the half-breed would forget the rules. At the first sign of foul play she would be ready to shoot.

Girondez did not give her the opportunity and it was soon obvious that Craig was wearing him down. He was sparring carefully, waiting until the half-breed's furious attacks should bring the inevitable result. For the moment Craig was content to go easy. Not that he escaped unscathed. Only a disembodied spirit could have avoided the hurricanes of blows.

Helen drew a little breath of excitement

and relief as the tenor of the fight changed perceptibly. Craig was no longer the attacked. She felt her blood pulse hotly through her veins. The hand-to-hand fight, with only herself as witness, stirred atavistic enthusiasms; it was life reduced to its primeval rhythm. Two men fighting—and the woman of their choice looking on. . . .

The end came suddenly, dramatically almost. Girondez, bleeding from the nose, and with one eye practically closed, was standing irresolute, his puffed lips drawn back in a snarl of hatred. He had read his opponent's intention, and knew that he was incapable of defeating it. As Craig advanced grimly, the half-breed braced himself to meet the attack. But it was hopeless. He was done, physically exhausted. A flashing right to the solar plexus doubled him up, his breath whistling through his lips in an oddly shrill escape—and then, like lightning, Craig's left fist came crashing upward to the half-breed's chin.

Girondez crumbled to the floor and lay still. . . .

CRAIG blew gingerly on his barked knuckles and nodded cheerfully, as he stared at the unconscious half-breed.

"I feel very much better, very much!" he observed, grinning at Helen. She tried to smile in return, but her lips trembled and a sudden mist rose in front of her eyes. She put the revolver on the table with a gesture of relief.

"I feel—queer," she said, and hurriedly sat down on a chair.

Craig was bending over her immediately, his triumph forgotten in his solicitude for her.

"It's all right," she reassured him. "Only a little faintness." Her eyes twinkled suddenly. "What about clearing up the debris?" she suggested.

Craig's relief found vent in a sudden gale of laughter. Everything was suddenly O. K. again. What a sport Helen was, too!

"I'll attend to it at once," he agreed.

He bent over the half-breed, and, getting his hands under the other's armpits, proceeded to drag him to the door and up the companionway. He would not let Helen help; jokingly he told her that she would

soil her hands. She guessed that he recoiled from the thought of her coming into physical contact again with the man who had not hesitated to lay hands on her forcibly. And she was glad of the knowledge.

She watched Frank drag Girondez to the rail, and she chuckled as she heard him ordering the astonished natives in the waiting dinghy to collect the refuse.

"I'd like to hear him when he wakes up!" Craig said longingly, as the dinghy moved off. "It would be an education!"

The dinghy, with the still unconscious Girondez, melted slowly into the darkness. But as though to reassure themselves that he was really gone, that the trials of the evening were over, Helen and Craig remained at the rail until the last faint sound of the rowlocks had merged into the soft murmur of the ocean on the outer beach.

The silence seemed suddenly to grow significant; unspoken words, unuttered replies were in the air. Ghosts of conversation seemed to float wraithlike around them. The stars shone more brightly; the universe itself seemed waiting for those ghosts to materialize.

Helen drew a deep breath that was almost a little gasp. Her thoughts had woven a spell over her, a spell that was difficult to shake off, but that *must* be shaken off.

"I'm going down," she said abruptly. In the stillness of the night her voice sounded edgy. "I'm going down; we must put the saloon to rights."

"Yes. Yes—we must put the saloon to rights." Craig, too, came back to realities. He was suddenly conscious of pain. Pain in his hip, in his nose, and a dull throbbing was in his head. The pain reminded him that his nose had been bleeding. "Lord! What a mess I must look!" he thought.

He laughed suddenly, and they both felt that the tension had snapped. An undercurrent of exultation swept through them both.

IT was left for a key lying upon the saloon table to jolt them back completely to reality. It was Helen who pointed to it.

"Frank—Temo! I had forgotten him. He is still—in there!" Her eyes sought the door at the further end of the saloon. She

was obsessed by a vague fear at the thought of Temo lurking in there behind that locked door. And they must go and search for him!

"Like stalking a wild tiger," she thought unhappily. She knew that Temo, his share in Girondez's plottings all too obvious, would not consent to being taken easily. He would be dangerous—just as a weasel or a stoat may be dangerous when cornered.

"We'll see if he'll come when he's called, anyway," Craig suggested, and unlocking the door, suited the action to the word.

No answer came. The silence that followed his peremptory command seemed only to emphasize the danger that lurked somewhere in those dark caverns which, until a moment ago, had been cabins. Even Craig felt an uneasy stir along his spine. It was uncanny, that silence! He caught himself listening for the sound of breathing.

With an effort he roused himself. The job had to be done—might as well get on with it.

"Get me the electric torch," he said in a low tone, and took the revolver from the table. Squaring his shoulders, he pushed open the door. There were four cabins to be investigated.

The succeeding three minutes were an agony to the waiting girl. She could hear Craig moving softly from cabin to cabin. As in turn he opened each cabin door she held her breath, waiting for—but she resolutely refused to let her mind dwell on the possibilities. Now there was only one more door to open. Temo *must* be in there! The certainty of that last door was worse for her, a thousand times worse, than the agonized uncertainty of the preceding three.

She heard the door open. There was a breathless pause. In her mind's eye she saw the silver pencil of Craig's torch cutting a line through the darkness—Temo, crouching, ready to spring—

Suddenly she started and her breath came in a little sob of incredulity and relief. Craig's voice came to her from the darkness.

"He's not here!"

But it was incredible! He must be there! They themselves had seen him pass through the door—and they had locked it behind him! Temo must still be lying there, some-

where! The searching pencil of light had failed to reveal him!

"He must be!" she called, uneasily. "He didn't come out!"

Craig suddenly reappeared in the saloon, his brows wrinkled in an effort to solve this problem.

"He's not there," he reassured her. "I'll swear to that. I've searched every nook and cranny. On top of the bunks—and underneath them. He's got away somehow."

"But he couldn't!" Helen said, with an irrepressible glance of apprehension at the dark companionway. "It's impossible, Frank! There are only the portholes, and he *couldn't* squeeze through them."

"I wouldn't put anything past that black devil!" Craig answered, and his voice was humorous. He was trying to restore the girl's morale.

But Helen shook her head.

"He couldn't have," she repeated dully.

But in that she was wrong. Temo had managed, by herculean efforts, to do just that thing. It had been no easy task, but fear had helped him on. Craig had come into the cabin not two minutes after Temo had won free. For Temo, wise in the generations of his wily ancestors, had not attempted to make his escape until after he had made sure that Girondez was not to be successful.

Craig walked slowly to the porthole of the saloon. This disappearance troubled him. It was almost uncanny. And then:

"Couldn't he?" he cried suddenly, pointing through the porthole. Following his finger, Helen saw the faint line of phosphorescence that marked Temo's passage through the dark waters. He was not more than a hundred yards from the ship's side, and against the stars' reflections in the waters, they could make out the faint silhouette of moving arms. It was Temo—of that there was no doubt.

They rushed up on deck.

"The dinghy, quickly, Frank!" An awful dread was gnawing at her mind. Temo hiding alone in those cabins—the pearl! She was sure in her own mind that the pearl was in Temo's possession—and by the time they got the dinghy out, Temo would have a long start on them. . . .

As it was, there was no call for the dinghy. Before they could get into it, another actor came into the drama of the night.

"Oh, Frank!" Helen caught at Craig's arm. "Look! Look!"

Out there on the face of the black waters, a second line of phosphorescence showed. It was unmistakable. Craig stared in horror. The two lines of phosphorescence were at an angle, but the second one was converging toward the track that Temo had left—and it was catching up with him. Craig wanted to shout a warning, but his throat was suddenly dry and parched.

In silence the two stood at the rail of the *Will o' the Wisp*. There was nothing to be done. The two lines had converged. . . .

A hoarse sharp scream cut through the gentle crooning of the ocean on the outer beach, shattering the peace and beauty of the night. Just the one cry, as the waters where the two lines of phosphorescence met grew suddenly to a churning maelstrom.

After that, silence. . . .

CHAPTER TWELVE

A RULE OF THE PEARLING GROUNDS

FOR a moment Helen leaned against Frank, weak and faint, overcome by the horror of the scene. Then, with an effort, she pulled herself together.

"Let me take you down to the saloon," Craig urged, his own mind still numb with the horror that had passed.

"I'm all right," she said faintly. "I'd rather—rather go down by myself, please."

She felt that she must make sure about the pearl. Not that there was any doubt in her own mind—but hoping frantically against hope, she wanted to make sure before she broke the unhappy news to Frank.

Sensing her determination, he allowed her to go.

He was still standing at the rail, staring out across the once more quiet bay, when she came back to his side.

"Frank—the pearl. . . ."

"What about it?" Craig's mind was still dazed with the suddenness of Temo's end. A traitor's death! There was that much about it; the black waters could be regarded

as the messengers of Fate—or at least the milieu of the messenger of Fate.

"It's gone, Frank! The pearl has gone! Temo must have found it. And now it's back in the Bay."

"The pearl gone?" Craig stared at her incredulously. "But it can't have. I'll swear to that!"

"But it has, Frank. I've—I've just been to look!"

Suddenly Craig laughed. The last bit of tension seemed to have gone. There was something that he could do to take Helen's thoughts away from Temo's fate. There was news to give her.

"I meant to tell you before," he said. "I didn't think your hiding place was a very good one, so I—altered it."

"Frank! You—you—"

Two minutes later he was back on deck, holding out his hand. In it lay the pearl, calmly iridescent, aloof, in its white purity, to the trouble and the bloodshed that it had caused.

"Frank!" Helen's voice was triumphant.

"Frank, half of it is yours. It's a rule of the pearling grounds. If you save a thing—a pearl, I mean, or anything that's stolen—it's half yours then. Don't you see what it means? You can buy that partnership now—without any misgivings. You've got the money, if you still—still want the partnership."

Frank Craig drew a long breath.

"You mean I'm to believe that? I really am entitled to half the value?"

"Of course!" Helen laughed, and part of her joy was in the fact that she knew that Frank, if ever he did discover that the "law" of halves was a sudden inspiration of her own mind, it would be too late for him to do anything about it. A man may not give evidence, so to speak, against his own wife. "Of course, Frank, we start the partnership from now!"

Craig's arm tightened about her.

"Two pearls in one," he murmured, against her lips. "The Pearl of Hell's Bay—for us. And for me, the Pearl of all the World!"

(The End)

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

A MORE colorful and glamorous romantic adventure than Peter Wayne's in *The Golden Knight* would be hard to find. Follow him across the hills of a far land, and into the palace of many legends—and thank Arthur Henry Gooden for a moving, beautiful love story.

FOR adventure on sea and land, and a stirring drama of a man and a girl caught in the strange web of chance, L. Ron Hubbard's novel, *Sea Fangs*, rings the bell from first word to last. It's adventure *plus*.

THERESA DANE'S death freed her family of a jealous, vindictive, eternally nagging woman—but left them at the mercy of the law. For Theresa Dane had been murdered. There's a terrific grip in this story—Beulah Poynter's *The Crescent City Murder*.

THE sons of the dusty diamond called him Slowpoke and were betting against him, but Bert Cord had to make the team. *Dusty Innings* is his story, and, being Philip Scruggs' novel, it's as fine a baseball story as we've seen in a long time.

GENE LOOMIS'S war on a thief who lurked in the night, robbing and killing, destroying what other men had labored to build up, makes *Shadow of the Buzzard*, Al Martin's story, a corking good tale of the range. It has speed, drama, and—inevitably—romance.



"Mary Fernworth first made him afraid," said Clark, softly. "Isn't that true?" (Page 131.)

DEATH AT SKY LODGE

By

Madeleine Sharps Buchanan

CHAPTER ONE

THE ICE MOANS



As the dog sled upon which he had ridden to Sky Lodge from the nearest town, fifteen miles away, slipped down the final incline to the Lodge entrance, Walter Clark was aware of a most disagreeable sensation. It seemed as though something sinister lurked not far off, and the memory of that night a year ago swept over him. He thought of the moment when he had come back to the blazing Lodge with David Long, flying like a bird on his skis, the glare of the dreadful fire, which had completely demolished the old building, in his face.

Then, long before the winter skies had been colored with the darting flames, he had felt this same premonition, this same warning of impending evil. Clark could not say what it was. A shadow. A chill. Enough to make him acutely miserable.

Glancing up at the re-built Sky Lodge playground, during the season of the winter sports, for a little group who had made the Lodge, far from any bus route, highway, or train or trolley, an exclusive club, Clark told himself the place had never

seemed the same since the fire. There was something more than the newness of the building, patterned after the old log structure, to account for this. There was a strain among the guests, a hidden tension. It had always puzzled Clark, and on this night it seemed to take almost a tangible form.

It must be midnight, and where was everybody? They must have had a strenuous day if they had retired so soon.

The sense of glorious peace and rest which he had always felt as he approached the Lodge was missing. He had been pleasantly excited and a bit worried, of course, because he had arrived determined to ask Janet Moore to marry him, and he was not at all sure of her. But that problem could not account for the constant feeling of unease that haunted him.

The dogs had dropped to the snow and were reclining with tongues out, while their owner, Tad Wallace, who had driven the team at Sky Lodge ever since there had been any Lodge, beat his fur-covered hands together.

"Some cold!" he said.

"Where is everybody, Tad?" Clark asked, glancing up at the windows of the long, low building

"They were out on skis today, and I guess they're all in," grinned Wallace.

He called to his dogs and jingled away toward the little log house where he lived all year round.

ENDEAVORING to throw off the troublesome feeling of something wrong, Clark stepped into the wide living hall, where the only light came from a dying log fire in the huge fireplace and a dull crimson lamp on the desk.

As he crossed the hall a slight sound from the direction of the parlors startled him. Stealthy movements were not the order of the Lodge. A cheery greeting from the person there in the shadows should have been forthcoming.

As he stepped to the arch that divided the room from the luxurious living hall, Clark was aware of two things. There was someone ahead of him in that velvet darkness, and he himself stood in bold relief in the doorway.

"Stop hiding in corners," he said, lightly. "It makes me nervous."

A gasp came from the darkness, and without hesitation Clark made for the spot from which it had come, his hand closing upon a round arm in a woolen sleeve.

"It's I—Janet," a girl's voice said, with a shaky laugh.

"Well! What are you doing hiding here, when you should have been waiting for me on the porch?" Clark said, wishing he might hold and kiss her as he longed to do. But people did not act impetuously with Janet.

"Who could wait on the porch tonight? Goose?" the girl laughed.

"It's one o'clock," said Clark. "What on earth are you doing down here in the dark?"

"Well, I came to find my leather jacket," she said.

"Oh! Do you sleep in it?"

"Walt!" Her tone was impatient. "I am going out. I didn't want to turn on the lights because Jake is asleep."

Jake was the night watchman.

The feeling of something wrong again gripped Clark.

"Come into the light," he said, a trifle sharply. "So you didn't want Jake to know you were going out at this hour!"

In the dim glow of the living hall, Clark looked at the girl, young, pretty, and at the moment defiant, standing there in her smart green skiing suit.

"I like you, Walt," she said, "but is it any of your concern what I do?"

"No," he said, wretchedly, "but it is not like you to sneak, Janet."

A fleeting softness came into the girl's eyes.

"Come if you like," she said, impulsively, "I'm going out to the toboggan slide."

As Clark followed her to the door, he saw a ray of light in the puzzle. If Janet's sister, Freda Long, had stolen into the white midnight world to hold a secret meeting with some man, Janet would do what she could to prevent it and to shield Freda, if Dave, her long-suffering husband, should follow. Janet had done that before, and prevented a fine scandal. Clark thanked the gods that Janet was not like her sister.

THE toboggan slide was outlined in tiny crimson lights which were left lighted all night, and a bright green glow shone at its top, unreal and phosphorescent. The Lake, too, was rimmed with bright lights, a cluster of them gathered at the log boat-house, like the brooch on a glittering necklace about a very white neck.

"Why the toboggan?" Clark asked, as they walked over the crisp snow. Though his apprehension lingered, still it was glorious to be alone with Janet in that frozen world.

"A whim," Janet said lightly, and then, after a moment of silence, she turned with a touch of impatience.

"Do go back, Walt," she said. "I have a reason for asking you to."

"No," said Clark grimly. "You told me I could come."

Janet said no more. She walked briskly toward the slide, and suddenly Clark saw that they were no longer alone in that isolated spot. Someone was mounting the

long flight of wooden steps to the top of the slide. Clark felt that it was a woman, although it was difficult to distinguish women from men at the Lodge, so similar were their garments.

"Somebody on the slide," he observed. This was not so astounding. Guests at the Lodge went out to try the various outdoor sports at all hours of the night. But a woman alone—that did seem strange.

The figure was stooping over the toboggan, which was usually left resting at the top of the slide. Many other smaller toboggans were propped against the steps, ready to be dragged up the long incline.

"I suppose it's Mary Farnworth," said Janet, in a strained voice. "She is always doing wild things."

Clark watched the figure high above them. He did not care for Mary Farnworth. He did not admire those strong, muscular, capable women who looked so smart in ski costume and like nothing on earth in evening dress. Mary Farnworth was like that. She spent almost all winter at the Lodge, and lived on an income so small that many wondered how she got along without a job of some sort.

"What would she be doing up there at this hour?" he asked impatiently.

"Well, she takes a dog team out at night alone," Janet said. "Why wouldn't she do this, if she took a fancy to it?"

Now the figure was seated on the toboggan. While Clark watched her idly, a strange sound, impossible to describe, came on the frosty air.

"I loathe that," Janet said, with a shiver.

"The ice," said Clark. "Water freezing under it."

"It moans," said the girl. "It sounds human to me, Walt. Listen to that!"

"Certain temperatures—" Clark began, when, with a rush, the toboggan flashed down the slide, rounded a curve, and flew out upon the ice, to vanish in the rim of velvet darkness at the opposite side of the lake.

As it vanished, the strange sound the ice had been making came again, clearer, and with what seemed to Clark a horrible note.

Janet caught his arm in tense fingers, her face chalk white.

"Are you *sure* that was the ice?" she whispered. "I never heard it sound like that before—like a moan choked off!"

"Nonsense! The ice doesn't moan!" Clark said briskly. "Neither does Mary Farnworth. Let's go back."

CHAPTER TWO

THE EMPTY TOBOGGAN

"O," Janet said, peering across the lake. "I want to see that person again. Where is he—or she?"

"That big toboggan goes a long way," said Clark.

"I must see her come back," Janet said firmly.

"For heaven's sake, did you come out here to watch that man or woman take that slide?" Clark said impatiently.

"No."

"Well, then, why wait here?"

"I don't believe that last sound was the ice," Janet said anxiously. "Listen. There it goes again. Like a moan. And where is that person? I've gone down this slide often enough to know we should see her by this time."

"Be yourself," Clark advised cheerfully. "She probably came out to meet some man. Let's get on a toboggan and go over."

"I feel sure it was Mary," said Janet. "She had on clothes like Mary's. And Mary Farnworth doesn't go out for midnight rendezvous with men."

Dragging a small toboggan up the steps, Clark went with Janet to the top of the slide, seated himself and the girl on the toboggan, and pushed the thing over the spring at the top of the long drop. They sped down through the biting Northern night in the path which the toboggan that had vanished had taken.

When at last they came to a stop, the other toboggan was not far off—but it was empty.

"Where do you suppose she's gone?" Janet whispered. "This is weird—and I'm frightened, Walt."

Clark felt there was something decided-

ly wrong, but he told himself he was a fool. The woman didn't *have* to be there!

"This isn't like the outside world," Janet said. "There are so few of us at the Lodge now. No women but Mary Farnworth, Miriam Cole, Freda and that pretty upstairs girl, Banning, and myself. I am certain that was a woman on the toboggan—and I know Mary's clothes."

Clark examined the other toboggan in detail and found nothing wrong.

"She's meeting someone on this opposite shore, I think. Are you satisfied?"

"Not a bit," Janet said. Suddenly she gripped his arm. "What's *that!*" she said sharply.

"That" was a huge dark place in the ice a little distance from the toboggan, some distance from the inky black edge of the lake.

"A hole, I don't doubt," said Clark, trying to be casual. "You know there are holes in the ice here and there."

"Not now—and not like that," Janet said, with a shudder. "You hear that moan? You just said it did that when it troze."

"I don't mean it's thawing," Clark said. "Are you trying to cook up a crime?"

"I don't know." Janet stooped. "Walt! Look! Somebody *made* this hole. No temperature did it."

Clark, staring at the yawning opening in the ice, said nothing. There had been a woman on a toboggan, and now there was no woman—and there was this gaping hole. It was, however, not near enough for the woman to have fallen into it. And there was no doubt that the ice had been hacked away, probably with a hatchet. Chopped through to the water.

"I have no flashlight," Clark said. "What do you want to do, Janet?"

"Do you suppose she is down there?" Janet shivered. "It might be Freda. We don't know."

Clark looked at her keenly.

"Freda!" he said. "I thought so. Well, you need not fear. I'm sure this woman was not Freda."

But he was not sure. He felt sure of nothing whatever, when Freda Long was concerned. But Janet loved her.

"Oh, it's dreadful here!" Janet said, drawing back. "Things have been wrong all day at the Lodge. Nothing went right. Jim Emerson lost his skis and couldn't go on that trip with us, and no one wanted to do anything when we got back. Then dinner was not good because we were late and Sen took his anger out on the food, and there were no discs to play shuffle board with—and now *this!*"

"Has anything happened that might make you expect a murder at the Lodge, Janet?" Clark asked bluntly.

"Oh, no!" Janet gasped. "A murder! Oh, let's go back, Walt! I can't stand it here."

The toboggan had been the quickest and easiest way to reach the opposite shore at that point, that was plain. But why that point? Because the hole was there? Clark could not recall anything of interest roundabout there. Just snow-covered hills and closely growing spruce and other trees.

That woman, whoever she was, might come stealing back to the Lodge sooner or later, and then they would feel like fools.

Picking up the rope on their toboggan, Clark glanced hesitantly at the other one. Better leave it where it was. The authorities might not want it disturbed if—but what the deuce was he thinking about?

He must be jittery. Of course, the night had rather horrible possibilities. And Janet's attitude, her intuitive feeling that something serious had happened, only added to his own presentiment of some sinister shadow hovering over the Lodge.

"Take a good look at that toboggan," he said to Janet. "Remember exactly where it is. We may not see it here again. Get the position of that pine behind it, and our own position."

"I'll remember exactly," Janet said, shivering a little.

In silence they replaced the small toboggan and started back to the Lodge, the snow crunching under their feet like tiny reports in the white stillness.

Suddenly Janet tightened her grip on Walter Clark's arm.

"There is someone coming out from the Lodge!" she whispered.

CHAPTER THREE

WHICH WOMAN?

NO stranger ever reached the Lodge without Tad Wallace's dogs being aware of it, and Clark felt little curiosity about the dark figure hastening toward them. Only a dog team could reach Sky Lodge at that season, and Wallace owned the only team in that vicinity. Twice a week he brought in mail, guests, and supplies.

But something Janet had said a short time before was troubling Clark as they walked on. The shuffle board discs were missing. There were a good many of them. They would make a heavy load. Who would take them—and why? Queer, that they were missing.

The approaching figure, Janet saw with relief, was Jake Meadows, the night watchman. The anxiety seemed to be all on his side as he peered at Janet and Clark.

"It's you, Mr. Clark!" he said. "I come out to see who was this coming across the snow. Folks ain't out at this hour often, unless there's a party. Gettin' colder, ain't it?"

"Yes," assented Clark. "Anyone else out, Jake?"

"Not that I know of, sir." Jake closed the heavy front door of the Lodge soundlessly, and the way he did it sent a chill along Walter Clark's nerves. As though Jake shut the door upon something he wished to keep hidden out there in the night as long as possible. But Jake had, as usual, been asleep all evening. He would not know who had gone in or out of the Lodge.

Clark followed Janet up the broad stairs.

"We'll see if Mary Farnworth is in her room," he said softly.

"And if she isn't?" Janet turned a frightened face over her shoulder.

"Find out what woman is not in her room," replied Clark. "I don't like this business, Janet."

Janet shook her head, wordless. They went on down the hall. Clark felt sure, for some reason, that a woman lay under

that ice, weighted down with the shuffle board discs. Only one part of his mind refused to believe this, the part that had been accustomed to well bred, law-abiding people, his friends. The friends isolated here with him, and to whom murder was a word in the tabloids.

Janet tried the door of a room not far from the top of the stairs. It opened instantly, on an attractive room with a night lamp burning beside the bed.

"She isn't here!" Janet said, in a still voice.

Clark's forebodings returned in force. "Look in the bathroom," he suggested.

Janet opened the door of the bath.

"No, she is not here," she whispered.

"But I know where she is!"

"Hush—you do not!" Clark said.

"I do," Janet said wretchedly. "I feel it. And perhaps we know too much, Walt."

Outside, the great trees snapped with the cold—miniature explosions that were startling in the silence of that room.

"Look here, Janet," said Clark. "I know you had nothing to do with any of this, no matter what happens or has happened. I want you to understand that. I caught you slipping out into the night at an ungodly hour, alone. But you had your own reasons, and you don't have to tell me."

Janet looked into his eyes, with a rarely tender smile.

"Thanks, Walt," she said simply. "I don't know anything about what may have happened out there on the ice. And I was not going out to meet a man."

"I know that," Clark said. "It was that beastly little sister of yours, of course. Well, I'm going around to hunt up the men now. Lock your door, Janet—and try to sleep."

Janet turned the key in Mary Farnworth's door and gave it to Clark.

"It might be a good thing to keep her room locked," she said.

Clark nodded, pocketing the key. He stood there in the hall, watching, as Janet went on to her own room.

There was an eerie feeling about the Lodge. Clark felt cold.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PUDDLES

AFTER hearing Janet turn the lock of her door, Clark waited for a moment in the hall, listening. There were faint sounds around the corner, the click of chips, the rattle of glasses, and the murmur of voices. Evidently there was a poker game on in Seth Holloway's room.

For some reason, Clark's eyes dropped to the rug before Mary Farnworth's door and he stared. There before his eyes was a small puddle of water! Moving slowly toward the rear stairs, Clark saw several other little pools. Melted snow. Someone had recently come into the Lodge, walked up the rear stairs, and either paused for a moment outside the Farnworth woman's door or entered her room!

Thinking deeply, Clark walked down the corridor to Seth Holloway's room. Seth was a stout, jolly chap, with plenty of money. He was generous to a fault, and very popular.

As he opened the door of Seth's room, Clark saw five men seated about a table and glimpsed bottles and glasses on a taboret nearby. The men's coats had been flung upon a couch, and chips and cards littered the table top.

How long had the game been in progress? To associate any of these men, all his friends, with that uncanny thing out on the ice seemed impossible.

Hands reached out to him at once, and voices welcomed him.

"We'd given you up," Seth boomed in his jovial way, a wave of his cigar welcoming the newcomer.

"I got in late," Clark said. "Anyone here but you fellows?"

"The fair sex and the servants," grinned Jim Emerson, a lean, lithe young man with a homely, humorous face. Jim was a successful lawyer and had gone to college with David Long.

Then all the men were here, all save Tad Wallace, Sen, the Chinese cook, and his helper, a young Irishman by name of O'Toole, a mere stripling.

"Been playing long?"

"About an hour," replied Herbert Cole, squinting at his cards.

Cole lived on his money. He was merely a nice looking, brainless young man, but his wife, Miriam, made up for all his shortcomings. Because of her charm, Bert Cole was asked everywhere.

So they had been playing an hour. Had all the men been present all of that time? Looking at them, Clark's gaze fell upon David Long, and he recalled that awful night when he had raced back to the Lodge with Dave, while the beloved old Lodge burned. Dave, with his red hair, his kind face, and his humorous mouth, was a fine sort. And he was Janet's brother-in-law—Freda's husband.

"I'd like to see you a moment, Dave," Clark said, refusing invitations to join the game.

Out in the hall, Clark drew Long away from the door and related his experience on the ice. To his vast relief, Long did not laugh at him.

"That looks damn queer, Walt," he said, frowning. "You say Mary is not in her room?"

"No, and that woman looked like her. Janet said she had on a suit like Mary's."

"Let's see if Freda is safe, before we go any further," Long said uneasily.

Clark stood outside Freda Long's door, while her husband entered her room.

"She's safe in bed, asleep," Long reported, when he came out. "Better not call Herb Cole just yet. We've been playing poker an hour, Walt."

"All of you?"

"Yes. No one left the room."

Clark stood there, frowning, for a moment, and then said impulsively:

"I guess you've never been out in this bleak, beautiful country when something was damn wrong in it, Dave. I was. I felt it. I can't sleep. I suggest we take lights and search for Mary Farnworth. We know she is not in her room."

"Eddie Jackson is a private detective," Long said, hesitantly. "He may know what to do. Yes, I move we make a search right away. Lord, I hope nothing is wrong, Walt! We're so isolated here!"

"Yes—and we're a darn narrow circle,

too," Clark said. "People don't drive casually by here, nor do they drop in to call."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE GROUND FLOOR

LACK ice in the shadow of the spruce and hemlock bordered the shore. Blacker water gaped beneath it. A glorious moon lit the rest of the lake. Twinkling lights, red and green, topped the slide, and rimmed the opposite shore of the lake. A little group of silent men, carrying powerful electric lamps and other things that had a sinister look, gathered about the body of a woman which lay prone at their feet, the body which, after long and persistent and agonizing effort, had been removed from the ice.

The woman was Mary Farnworth, and so far as they could tell, out there in the freezing cold, in the shifting lights, there was no mark of violence on her.

Walter Clark had found a snow-covered log and was seated upon it, feeling faint and ill. The entire business seemed haywire. Who had killed Mary Farnworth, while all the men were playing poker in Seth's room? There they were, fine chaps, his friends. They had played about together up there at the Lodge year after year. Clark was glad there were a few of his friends not present!

The ice-crusts branches of the trees behind him moved creakingly in the frigid wind, and the strange cracking sound the ice made added to the eeriness of the scene.

Seth Holloway, panting a little, came and sat beside Clark.

"Suffering cats, but this is awful!" he groaned. "We'll have to get a doctor in here or a sheriff. One of us killed her, Walt."

"It's murder, all right," said Eddie Jackson, coming aimlessly over to Clark.

Jackson had recently opened a detective agency, to the vast amusement of his friends, but so far as anyone knew to date he had detected nothing but a tendency in the office to eat up his income. He was a tall, attractive man of thirty or so, and he

was wrapped from head to foot in blankets, his clothing having become drenched in the recent ordeal.

"Let's take her up to the house," said Seth, rising heavily. "We'll catch pneumonia, Eddie, if we stick around here."

"She took the toboggan to meet someone this side of the lake," mused Jackson, as, teeth chattering, he accepted Clark's flask. "Now why—unless it was so they would not be seen from the Lodge."

"It was no weak man who tackled Mary," said Clark. "She could put up a strong fight. She was as strong as some of the men here."

As he spoke he looked down at an object on the ice. A burlap bag containing the shuffle board discs, which had been tied to Mary Farnworth's ankles. One thing puzzled him greatly. How could this have been done while Janet and he were preparing to follow Mary across the ice? Only a comparatively short time had then elapsed.

Back at the Lodge they found the women waiting for them, with old Jake pottering about, throwing logs on the fire.

Freda Long, ornamental as usual, wearing a soft blue negligée trimmed with silver fox, was crouched in a huge chair near the fire. The bands of her pale gold hair lay flat on either side of her shapely head. As he looked at her, Clark again remembered the night the old Lodge burned and Jim Emerson had come staggering from the building in his thin pajamas carrying Freda in his arms—Freda, that night also, in a blue robe trimmed with fur.

Miriam Cole, in scarlet pajamas with a black and scarlet coat, was kneeling by the fire, rubbing her soft palms together and shivering. Miriam was a type Clark did not admire. She wore her thick, deeply waved black hair drawn behind small shell pink ears. Her mouth was always heavily rouged, and her skin was pale as old ivory. As she looked up at the arriving men, Clark fancied her pallor deepened.

On the outskirts of the group an extremely pretty girl, Banning, a maid, hovered about nervously. Clark thought she

seemed entirely too nervous, but thought perhaps he was imagining things.

Janet, in a warm dressing gown—there were no frills about Janet—ran to Clark and seized his arm as he entered the hall.

"Did you find her?" she cried, but there was no need of a reply. The heavy steps of the men coming down a side corridor to the smoking room were enough.

"It is Mary?" she whispered.

Clark nodded. "Yes. Will you get Sen up and have him make coffee? We are all about frozen."

"I will get sandwiches and coffee," said Banning, softly, and ran from the living hall as though glad to get away.

"And I'll get Tad Wallace," said Holloway. "He always knows what to do."

"I'll go with you," Clark said.

He felt that he was on the ground floor of this thing. He could not afford to miss a trick. He had seen Mary Farnworth dropping to her mysterious death on that deserted moaning ice.

CHAPTER SIX

"NO MAN WOULD KILL HER FOR LOVE"

THE picturesque log house in which Tad Wallace had lived winter and summer for almost all of his life was unlighted as Clark and Holloway approached it. The dogs, curled in the snow, stirred. They knew the callers and made no outcry.

The night was glorious, the air was filled with ozone. As Clark stepped on Wallace's little porch, he glanced at the great white moon with the seeds of the tall birches etched in feathery patterns against it. Blue-white and fashioned in crystal was the world about him, but the crimson figure of murder had stalked here!

When Wallace opened the door, he wore flannel pajamas and seemed to have been roused from sound slumber.

"What's up?" he asked, but no one spoke until all three were seated in his small living room, which was lighted only by a smoldering fire.

Wallace was about fifty. A tall, rugged man of brawny shoulders and horny

hands, he was built for the North. He took his baths in snowdrifts, into which he plunged head-first.

"Maybe she fell in," he offered without emotion, when Clark had told him all that had occurred. "She took my dogs out one night and drove them through a crack in a portage. Don't know how she managed it, with the brutes so smart. I had the devil of a time getting them out again."

"You mean—" Clark hesitated.

"Yes. Drank too much now and then," Wallace said. "But she never lost her head. Didn't drink much when you folks were here."

"I never knew that about Mary Farnworth," said Holloway slowly.

"I wouldn't be saying it if it wasn't true," Wallace said. "And no man would kill her for love—she was too much like a man herself. She liked the Lodge, and she was writing a book about her life up here. She got it done yesterday and gave it to me to mail. I took it to town when I went for you, Mr. Clark, and forgot to mail it. I laid it on my table in yonder, and I knew she would be tearing mad at me for forgetting it. I wasn't going to tell her, but meant to mail it next time I took the team to town. She kidded herself that she was a writer."

Clark nodded as he followed Wallace into the bedroom. He knew that Mary Farnworth had longed to be a writer, although, so far as he was aware, she had never sold a story in her life. The mention of this book aroused his interest.

"Here it is," said Wallace, as he picked up a package from the table beside his bed. "Want to see it?"

"Yes." Clark produced a penknife and cut the string that bound the package.

A pile of blank papers fell out, a mass of the unused stationery from the Lodge!

"The book has been taken from here," he said, sharply. "Either that, or Mary Farnworth gave you blank pages to mail."

He read again the name of a well known publishing house, which had been printed on the wrapper of the papers.

"I don't know what she gave me," said Wallace, staring at the blank sheets in

amazement. "It looks just the same to me."

"Would anyone have had a chance to do this before you started to town with this package?" asked Clark.

"Well, yes. I was busy on the lake, sweeping off the snow, almost all day."

"Tad, unless someone came in here on a team and went the same way, one of our group murdered this woman," said Holloway, bluntly.

"Unless she fell in," Wallace persisted. "And no stranger brought any team here tonight and took it out again. I'd know it, and so would the dogs. No team could get within a mile of here."

"Lord, man," Clark said, sharply. "she didn't fall in with a bag of shuffle board discs tied to her ankles!"

"Then I'd better be moving out of here," Wallace said, and reached for his coat. "I'll get Doc Pierson and the chief of police, if I can. There is only one track out of here, as you know, and it crosses the portages. Been nobody in here for days. If there had been man or beast over that track when I came in last, my dogs and I would have known it."

CHAPTER SEVEN

DOC PIERSON SPEAKS

DAY dawned as gray as a ghost. Clark, worn by the long vigil of the night, stood on the porch of the Lodge and looked out over the snow-covered world, at the splotches of crimson where, here and there, the red-osier dogwood glowed, at the black-green of massed hemlocks, the tall pines, straight as candles, guarding the path to the toboggan slide.

The nipping morning air, choked with little snow flurries, failed to brace him. The charm of the Lodge had fled.

Tad Wallace had not yet returned. The dogs had come over this hard trail a few hours previous, and Wallace would not push them.

Leaving the porch, Clark strolled down to the lake. to the space Wallace and O'Toole had cleared for the skaters. Suddenly he stood still, staring at the ice at

his feet. Someone had been doing some fancy skating, writing on the ice! There it was, well done, plain to be seen: *At ten.*

Could this have anything to do with Mary Farnworth? It had been near one in the morning when he had seen that woman on the toboggan slide.

He did not know anyone at the Lodge who could write with skates. But there lay the evidence, cut in crystal!

Glancing up, Clark saw Wallace's famous team coming over the snow, running fast and low.

Had Tad done this? He was as strong as an ox, and he feared nothing. But the man who had dropped Mary Farnworth under the ice had feared her, Clark felt.

FERD RUMSON, chief of police in the small town nearest the Lodge, was a lank, raw-boned Northerner. He ran more to brawn than to brains. His examination of the assembled group in the living room—while Doctor Pierson examined the body—impressed Clark with his incompetence. For here were clever people, keen thinking, cultured, not too honest perhaps, loving the flesh pots. This police chief would never get at the truth through the pointless questions he asked.

The fact that all the men had been playing poker at the time Mary Farnworth went down the toboggan slide seemed to stump the chief at the start. To cap this, both Sen and O'Toole asserted that from their windows they could see Wallace moving about in his cabin until after one A. M. Of course, this could not be proved, but it further bewildered the chief.

Just as David Long was pressing another imported cigar upon him, Doctor Pierson entered and stood looking about the living hall with keen thoughtful eyes. Instantly the atmosphere seemed taut, electric.

Walter Clark saw that here was the man. Not the policeman. This doctor. He was the one for the guilty to fear.

"I find," said the doctor, in a mild voice entirely at variance with his shock of white hair, shaggy brows and thin,

strong mouth, "that Mary Farnworth came to her death by drowning at nine or ten o'clock last evening. I can't be exact, but death did not occur later than ten."

Ten The word fell like a bomb, leaving a crushing silence after it. Clark saw before him the writing on the ice: *At ten*. That had been the death appointment, then, written by someone's feet! By Mary Farnworth herself?

"But Miss Moore and I saw Mary going down the toboggan slide around one this morning!" Clark said. "We watched her cross the lake on the toboggan!"

"We certainly did," said Janet.

"You didn't see the woman whose body I just examined," said Doctor Pierson, firmly. "This woman had been immersed in this freezing water for hours. Death didn't come later than ten. There is no mark of violence upon her, although, judging from the condition of her clothing, I should say she fought for her life. I have examined too many bodies taken from the freezing waters of the North to make any blunders about this matter. But this seems a great shock to all of you."

A shock? The room was deathly still. No man, possibly, had an alibi. The poker game had not been in progress when Mary Farnworth died. And out on the lake, carved in ice, lay the evidence that would back up the doctor's word!

Then the woman he had seen going down that slide had been someone else, thought Clark. One of these women, perhaps, here in the living hall of the comfortable, beloved old Lodge! He looked at Freda Long, at Miriam Cole, and at the pretty maid, Banning, who was standing against the wall staring at the doctor with dilated eyes. One of these women had gone down that slide in order to give the murderer an alibi. Thought of the wet spots in the upper hall recurred to him. What had they meant, *outside her door?*

"But this throws us all out in the cold!" Seth Holloway said suddenly.

"Sure, we've no alibis whatever," drawled Cole. "Now the fun begins!"

"Janet and Walt saw a ghost!" said Freda, with a nervous laugh.

"Not much," said Clark. "We saw a flesh and blood woman."

"Yes, we did," Janet said, faintly.

Clark was thinking rapidly. One of these three women must have known that Janet was going out into the midnight world. And she must have known that Wallace was going to meet him, and expected one of them to see her—Tad Wallace possibly. Someone. Some woman. But no woman could have pushed Mary Farnworth under that ice, dragged her out again, perhaps, and tied those shuffle board discs to her dead feet! The thought was too horrible, but Clark's eyes lingered on Miriam Cole's scarlet finger-tips.

There was another possibility. Suppose the woman on the toboggan had tried to point a finger at Mary Farnworth's burial place? Knowing of the crime, had she used the toboggan to tell the members of the club where to search? If so, then her own life at that moment was not worth a candle.

"This," said Jim Emerson, rising and pacing the rugs, "is a devil of a mess."

Clark looked at his twitching face, his nervous fingers crumbling his cigarette.

"We shall have to remember where we all were between nine and ten last night," David Long said, with a sigh.

"Where was Mary?" asked Miriam Cole.

Clark glanced at her sharply. She was wearing a pale green gown caught about her waist by a cord, its flowing sleeves fastened at her wrists by oriental jeweled cuffs. The dress made her look like a gypsy. But was she capable of more devilment than Freda Long? Clark knew not too admirable things about Freda.

"None of us saw Mary last evening," said Jackson, quietly. "She went to her room right after dinner, to write letters—or so she said. We were all tired out. We had been out on skis and had come back and skated awhile."

Walter Clark picked up his leather jacket and went out on the porch. Pacing up and down there, he fingered the key to Mary Farnworth's bedroom, the key he had thrust into his pocket. Perhaps the man or woman who had stolen her book

had not had a chance at her room as yet. He felt a keen desire to do a little exploring, before that bungling police chief got around to it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

STRANGE RECORD

MARY FARNWORTH'S room was a cheerful apartment which spoke eloquently of its occupant. Pictures of dog teams and winter sports adorned the walls. Cups which she had won herself at various affairs were here and there. A pair of skis, painted by some artist of the North, and tied together with a leather thong, were fastened on one wall of the room. No pictures of either men or women.

Clark passed by the bureau and dressing table, and opened the closet door. Just why he did so, he did not know. But at once he saw it. A woolen skiing suit, lying on the floor, where it had apparently been hastily flung. It was green. Clark had often seen Mary wearing it. Before he touched it, he knew why both Janet and he had felt sure the woman on the toboggan slide had been Mary Farnworth. The woman had worn this suit—the clothing of the murdered woman—hours after she lay dead under the ice!

Clark felt a little sick, but he forced himself to stoop and lift the suit, running his hands over it with shuddering reluctance. The wool was still damp.

Either Freda Long, Miriam Cole, or the maid, Banning, had played this dreadful rôle—to help the murderer!

The frozen arms of a tree scratched at a window pane of Mary Farnworth's room, and Clark dropped the green suit where he had found it, thinking again of the pools of melting snow outside Mary Farnworth's door and along the corridor to the stairs.

Rousing himself with an effort, he turned to the desk. There was little in it of a personal nature. Too little, perhaps. Mary Farnworth had been strangely careful. A note or two from a woman friend—nothing from men. Receipted bills. A bill from a furrier for an ermine

coat, marked "Please send check if possible," was receipted. Cards of membership to various clubs. Bank books. Cancelled checks. Nothing more. Yes, something, by Jove! In an envelop. A scrap of blue silk, scorched and burned!

For a moment Clark looked carefully at this bit of silk. A queer thing for a woman like Mary Farnworth to treasure. Just for luck, he put it back in its place and slipped the envelop into his pocket.

The bank books came next. There were three. Picking them up along with a bunch of check books of the folding variety, and the envelops of canceled checks, he decided to go. A sensation of approaching disaster was upon him.

He turned the key in Mary Farnworth's door and left it there, then went along the corridor to his own apartment. He sat down, with the bank books and the check books on the table before him. He intended to replace them when he had thoroughly examined them. He had not liked Mary Farnworth, but the brutality of her murder horrified him.

A HALF hour later he was frowning thoughtfully over the books he had spread out to study. He had found a strange thing.

In her small, clear writing, Mary Farnworth had set down each amount deposited in and withdrawn from three banks. But the books and the check stubs told Clark of a haphazard existence. At one moment, Mary had been in funds. At the next, her ready cash had come down to twenty dollars or less. This would be carefully spread out over the three accounts. Barely enough to keep the account open would be left at times, only to be increased a few days later by hundreds of dollars!

Now what had Mary Farnworth done that would account for this condition in her financial affairs? She had no profession and no business. At the time of her death she had, according to the books, about fifty dollars. Her last large deposit had been a thousand dollars, which had been placed in October over the three banks. Interesting. Very interesting.

An idea began hammering at the back of Clark's mind. It fitted in with the fact that while no one had liked Mary, she had been invited, now and then, to some popular hostess's home.

He would not dare question Janet—there must be perfect trust between them. He was not at all sure of her, but the girl had been in such an overwrought state ever since the night before, that it certainly seemed no time to tell her he loved her. She knew it anyhow.

However, Clark did not intend to stop until he had dragged out the truth, for all their eyes to see.

CHAPTER NINE

FEAR?



LARK found old Jake Meadows in his cabin, talking with Eddie Jackson. Jackson seemed to be putting all his detective ability—if any—into the case.

The day was still misty and gray, and a soft white blanket, Clark felt, would, by this time, be laid over that significant writing on the ice. But it was there, that death appointment for the woman who, so soon after, lay pinned under the crystal sheet upon which it was written!

If Janet and he had only hastened their steps the night before, and overtaken that tall, slight figure so like Mary Farnworth's, before the toboggan had flashed from sight!

"Jake can't tell us anything, Walt," said Jackson. "Holy smoke! To think my first murder case should involve my best friends, and in the one place I'm really fond of!"

"You'll have to strut your stuff now, Ed," Clark said.

"Man, you know how I'm handicapped here among my best friends!" said Jackson, indignantly.

"This here chief," drawled old Jake, "he's no good. The doc's the one. You can't fool him. He's got two folks for poisoning cases, and one fellow for stealing furs. But I ain't got a thing to tell. I'd been taking forty winks last night and I woke up with a jump, like I'd been

asleep on the job, you know. Something was in the air. Like I'd heard steps I couldn't hear any longer, or a door that closed while I was just waking up, you know. So I set out to look around. I saw you and Miss Moore."

"I figure Jake heard that woman returning," said Jackson. "Several people might have gone in and out."

"I didn't see a soul but Mr. Emerson," said Jake. "He went out before I came on duty."

"When was that?"

"Around ten, maybe. He was alone, and he was headed for the other side the lake when I saw him, kinda uncertainlike."

"Uncertain?"

"Yep. Kinda hesitating. But I didn't pay much heed to him. He and Miss Farnworth always seemed friendly, to me."

"Jake saw Mary Farnworth and Emerson chatting together when he came to the Lodge for supper last night," said Jackson. "That was about six."

"I got the idea, though, that Mr. Emerson and Miss Moore were going to make a match of it," grinned old Jake, slyly.

Clark looked at the watchman in amazement. Jim and Janet? Janet had known Emerson all her life, and treated him like a brother!

"I think you're wrong," he said.

"Maybe—but they've been together a lot this week, talking," Jake repeated.

"They have, Walt," Jackson said impatiently, "but there's nothing to it. Janet is for you, I feel sure. I'm good enough detective to spot that."

"Mr. Emerson never killed that woman," said Jake, stubbornly. "No one Miss Janet likes is going to up and commit murder."

"Let's get back," suggested Jackson. "I've something to show you, Walt."

CLARK was only vaguely alarmed by what Jake had said. Loving Janet as he did, he felt sure he would have guessed if she cared for Jim. Suddenly as he walked with Jackson over the crisp snow, the need for haste swept him. Something seemed to tell him to act before the fall of another night.

The snow had ceased to fall, and the underbrush showed umber-brown against the crystal background. It was too beautiful a spot to be spoiled by brutal murder.

"Look here," said Jackson, and took from his pocket a length of rope. "This was tied, to the shuffle board discs bound to Mary's ankles. It came from the side of one of the smaller toboggans. We just examined the toboggan. That Doctor Pierson is shrewd. He doesn't say much. I'm to give this rope to Rumson. Pierson seems to have all the say. He's coroner. He brings in the evidence, I guess, while Rumson holds the office of chief of police. I think they look down on me and my efforts."

Clark viewed the rope with a shudder.

"How can we get anywhere, Ed?" he groaned. "All of you, friends, here alone!"

"She was up to some game, that Farnworth woman," mused Jackson. "I got that much long ago. I didn't like her for a cent. And where's that book she wrote? If we could get our hands on it—I've looked high and low, and it doesn't show up."

"Do you know anybody here who can write on the ice with skates, Ed?" Clark asked, with apparent irrelevance.

He glanced, as he spoke, at the clearing sky, across which the smoke from the Lodge chimneys trailed darkly.

"No, I don't," said Jackson, startled.

"You *are* the hell of a detective, aren't you?" said Clark. "Well, come on to the lake. I have something to show you now. There's Pierson on the porch—perhaps he'll come with us. I don't know whether the snow flurries have covered what I found this morning, or not."

At Jackson's call, the tall, stalwart doctor joined the men.

"One thing intrigues me, gentlemen," he said. "And that is the woman who took that toboggan slide while you men—with the exception of Mr. Clark—were playing poker. Is she friend or enemy? If friend, she must be carefully guarded, for the hole is already chopped in the ice. If enemy, she must be carefully watched. She is now either fully awake to her own danger, or to the danger of the man."

"There are so few women," Jackson said wretchedly.

"But one of them is guilty," Pierson said bluntly.

"Yes," Clark was gazing at the ice. "I'll need a broom. I'll go get one, then I'll show you what someone wrote here with skates. And I'll bring back the crowd. I'd like to see their faces when I bring that writing to light."

Everyone but Jim Emerson was in the living hall about the huge log fire. They were eating a luncheon Banning had served upon card tables, and they greeted Clark's suggestion with cries of relief.

"That's it, action!" David Long said, briskly. "This Rumson is dumb. He's hammering at O'Toole and old Sen now, and all he gets out of Sen is a wail that there's murder in the air, and he doesn't know enough not to ask the Chinaman *why* he says it."

Clark's depression increased as he ascended to Emerson's room.

The door was partly open, and Jim was standing by the window with a pistol in his hand. Clark could not see whether he was loading it or examining it, but he saw the drawn, serious expression of his friend's face. What did Emerson fear? Was it the law? The too-clever Doctor Pierson? Or something worse?

Clark retreated a few steps, then approached noisily and knocked on the painted door.

"We're wanted by the lake, Jim," he announced in a cheery tone, and as he accepted Emerson's invitation to enter, he saw that there was now no trace of the gun. He did not like that. He would have felt more comfortable if Emerson had shown it to him and told him what he had been doing with it—and what he feared.

CHAPTER TEN

ASHES

AND so," observed Doctor Pierson, as he walked with Clark toward the spot where Mary Farnworth had died, "we got nowhere. A very clever group of people, Mr. Clark."

"Perhaps no one did see the message

skated into the ice," Clark said. "Wallace says, and so does O'Toole, that they did not notice it when they swept the lake yesterday."

Pierson didn't speak again until they stood beside the gaping hole in the ice. Then:

"It was Jackson and Emerson who got her out?" he asked.

"Yes." Clark shuddered, remembering. "They know the currents and the action of the water here. Of course she was weighted."

"And none of you called Tad Wallace?"

Clark was startled.

"Good heavens, no!" he said. "Nobody seemed to think of him. We were so upset, and at first we didn't realize anything was wrong."

Pierson nodded, staring at the long toboggan which the mystery woman had ridden, and which still stood where Janet and Clark had found it.

"She put up a stiff fight," he said. "Seems as though we should find something here we can fasten to. If she rode a toboggan to this spot, of course, it was put back after the crime. There is no clue on any of them. Well, let's look about, brother. Luck may be with us."

It was a beautiful shore, massed with the dark hemlocks, dotted here and there with the pale yellow of poverty-grass, threaded by a frozen brook. There was an alder swamp to the left, but skirting it was a snow-shoe trail. Along this the man walked, scanning the white trail for one clue that might set them on the right track.

The sharp report of a frost-bitten tree startled Clark just as the doctor paused where there had apparently been a recent fire.

"This was made last night some time," said Pierson, kneeling beside the cleared black space in the snow. "A good fire, built by a man who knew what he was doing. You see how those balsams form a windbreak? He needed a strong blaze, and he burned some kind of garment. Why would he do that? There was no blood. The body wore its full ski costume."

As Pierson spoke, Walter Clark was searching eagerly in the black ashes, the trampled snow and the burned sticks. The snow told him where a man had knelt to shield the blaze, although the trail was so confused that it was not possible to pick up footprints. There were, however, several bits which he fished out of the ashes which might prove interesting. They had once belonged to some sort of woolen garment.

"I'll examine these scraps, Doctor," he said, "because I know the clothing of every man here."

Doctor Pierson was a man of few words. He nodded briefly.

"Keep them a while if you wish," he said. "And you might keep an eye on the women at the Lodge. The pretty maid—Banning—also. Don't omit *her*."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ALIBIS



ALTER CLARK was no chemist, nor was he a detective, yet it did not take him long to decide what had been destroyed in that fire along the lake shore. He used a magnifying glass and some common sense.

To several bits of the blackened wool there adhered bits of a smoother substance. One of these had faintly retained its color—a rich red. Clark knew what he had found.

Each man at Sky Lodge had a sweater with SKY LODGE sewed on it in deep red letters. The sweaters were white, heavy garments with high collars.

Mary Farnworth, in her frantic struggle for life, had probably torn this sweater so badly that its owner did not dare to keep it.

As he sat there, feeling old, drained out, Clark saw, for no reason at all, the floor plan of the old Lodge. He saw the arrangement of each bedroom, and he wondered why he had not thought of this possibility before. Mary Farnworth had known too much—and so she had died.

Old Sen muttering of murder to come. Another crystal night descending upon their isolated world. The sense of need

for hurry increasing in him. Jim Emerson with a gun in his hands, his face white and drawn. Jim and Janet, *his* Janet. It was Jim Emerson who had staggered out of the burning Lodge with the unconscious form of Freda Long in his arms. Freda had worn a *blue silk negligée*. There had never been anything between Freda and Jim—that was definitely out—but—

A glance from his window showed Clark Tad Wallace, running lightly from his cabin, wearing his Sky Lodge sweater.

The thing to do was to round up the sweaters. One was missing. And no stranger had been at Sky Lodge in the early hours of that morning. . . .

IT was not difficult to go through the men's rooms, for no door was ever locked at the Lodge, and everyone, so far as Clark could tell, was below in the living hall.

Inside of twenty minutes there was but one room left to examine, Jim Emerson's. Clark had located the sweater of every other man and he was aware that, for some reason, he had left Emerson's room to the last.

Of all the men at the Lodge, Jim Emerson was the last Clark would ever have connected with murder, and he was in doubt as to whether or not he could have handled so strong, so muscular a woman as Mary Farnworth. Still, there was the dreadful thought that had occurred to him a short time ago. It was wild, it was outrageous—but he *had* to know about Jim's sweater.

Moving as quietly as possible down the corridor Clark saw the door of Emerson's room open and Jim and Janet Moore come out, stand chatting together for a short time, then separate, Janet to hasten to her own room, Emerson to saunter down the stairs to the group below.

Walter Clark stood still. There had been furtiveness, secrecy, in the manner of both the man and the girl, and not for one moment did Clark, who had loved Janet Moore for years, doubt that something serious lay between them. Janet's lovely face had been drawn and pale.

Well, this was a murder investigation. In some way Janet was involved in it. The fact that she had been with him when that unknown woman went down on the toboggan meant nothing now. The woman had not been Mary Farnworth. Where had Janet been when the murder took place? What the devil did she know about it, a charming, gentle, altogether fine girl like Janet?

A flare of rage swept through him. He would get the murderer of Mary Farnworth, no matter what devilment he exposed! So far, Tad Wallace was the only man who could be eliminated. When that fatal struggle took place near the gaping hole in the ice, Wallace had been far from Sky Lodge, with his dogs.

Entering Emerson's room, Walter Clark proceeded to examine it carefully. In but a few moments he knew that Jim Emerson's Sky Lodge sweater was the one that was missing—the only one.

But there was something else missing from Jim Emerson's room. The gun.

Outside the door Clark encountered Doctor Pierson lighting a pipe, looking after the slight figure of Banning, the maid, who was vanishing around a corner.

"Pretty girl," he drawled.

"Been here several years," Clark said, slightly taken aback by the doctor's unexpected appearance.

"Oh, yes. There's nothing I don't know now about these folks, except the things they don't want me to know," the doctor grinned. "I've got all the alibis and the lack of alibis neatly stacked up. Been talking to them until I'm worn out with their lies and their tricks."

"I can't see that the chief is much help," said Clark shortly, wondering what this backwoodsman had uncovered.

"Oh, Ferd is a lot of help," said Pierson, mildly. "He shows me what *not* to do."

"Did you wish to see me?" asked Clark.

"Yes, but I see you don't want to talk to me," said the doctor grimly. "You got something out of the scraps, Mr. Clark? And out of the Farnworth woman's room? Miss Moore said she had given you the key."

There was no help for it. He would have to tell Pierson the few things he had discovered. But he would not show him the scrap of burned blue silk.

"Yes, perhaps you would think so," he replied, and led the way to his room. "Come in and I'll tell you what I think. I really haven't laid my hand on anything."

And yet, as he entered his room, Clark wondered if this was true. He remembered something Janet had said to him the night before, as they returned to the Lodge. Jim Emerson had not been able to find his skis and could not accompany them on the skiing trip. Why had Jim stayed home? Had it been to hack that gaping hole in the ice? But why, for heaven's sake? What could Jim Emerson have had against Mary Farnworth? Of course, if the idea he kept trying to thrust out of his mind had any foundation—

Doctor Pierson threw a paper down on the table before Clark's eyes, and dropped lazily into a deep chair.

"There's the crop," he said. "Look 'em over. Tell me if they sound natural. You know these folks, I don't. I wouldn't believe any of 'em on a stack of Bibles."

With a slightly unsteady hand, Clark picked up the paper and saw that it was a fairly systematic account of his friend's activities during the time of the crime the night before.

Miss Moore and Mrs. Long. In Mrs. Long's bedroom, chatting before retiring. No one to back this up. Ten to eleven.

Mr. Emerson. Searching by lake for skis which had been lost. Alone. Returned to room to write letters. Ten to possibly eleven-fifteen. No one to back this up.

Mrs. Cole. In kitchen making fudge. Talking there with Sen and O'Toole. Nine-thirty to ten-thirty, or thereabouts. These three vouch for each other.

Banning, the maid. In and out of the kitchen during fudge-making. Polishing silver in pantry. Nine forty-five to eleven. Sen, O'Toole and Mrs. Cole back this up.

Mr. Holloway. Arranging his room for poker party. Searching Tad Wallace's cabin for choice whisky supposedly there. Shortly

before ten to eleven. Mrs. Cole saw Holloway, from kitchen window, returning from Wallace's cabin. Not sure of time, but thinks about quarter to eleven. No one else to vouch for this.

Mr. Cole. Asleep on couch before living hall fire. Fell asleep around nine, as nearly as he can tell. Was awakened at eleven or so, to taste wife's candy. Knows nothing in interval and apparently no one saw him. This is not surprising. The position of the couch makes it possible.

Mr. Jackson. In his own room making out a report on a certain case that has occupied him in town. No one to vouch for this. Appeared for poker party around eleven, or a trifle later.

Mr. Long. In game room reading and listening to radio. Always tunes in on certain programs. Thinks he was there from around nine-thirty to close to eleven, when called by Holloway for poker game. No one to back this up.

NOW there you are," Pierson said, as Clark looked up with dull eyes. "We can eliminate Mrs. Cole and Banning, and the three men—Sen, O'Toole, and Tad Wallace. That narrows the circle. But one of these women knew all about the crime and, during the poker party, fixed up a neat little alibi. After such a hole as that is chopped in the ice, brother, it can't be covered up again, like earth. It wouldn't have been long before you looked for Mary Farnworth.

"Just picture these women, now. One of them making candy. One of them going about her simple domestic duties. Two of them chatting in a bedroom. A nice quiet little club house. With all hell hatching in its midst!"

"What do you know?" asked Clark, tight-lipped.

"I know most of them are telling me lies," replied the doctor gently. "Does the Lodge keep extra pairs of skis?"

"No, we have our own. This isn't a public club."

"Well, Mr. Jackson found Mr. Emerson's," sighed the doctor. "Back in the closet in the hall, in a corner. This Jackson seems a rather clever chap, although he is

so fond of these people I can't trust him. It looks as if Emerson didn't lose those skis at all, but did not wish to go on that ski trip. How does it strike you?"

"That way," said Clark, miserably. He was looking out the window, through which the first hint of the steel-blue winter dusk was creeping. Another night! He could not endure the thought of it.

"Don't you think Mary Farnworth's body should be taken away?" he asked.

"Tomorrow will be time enough," said Pierson. "I'm the coroner. Mr. Clark, did you ever see that pretty little trick Banning trying to get on close terms with any of these men?"

"Not especially, no. I think she flirts, or tries to. But these men don't go in for her kind."

"She was chummy with the dead woman," said Pierson, thoughtfully. "I caught her a few moments ago in the hall, examining something. She hid it in her apron as I came along. I told her to come out with it, and she showed me a gold bangle set with a diamond, which she said Miss Farnworth had given her. She was weeping over it, and afraid I would think she had stolen it. Expensive present. I found a fur jacket in her room, too, which she admitted had been a gift from Mary Farnworth. Did the dead woman strike you as generous?"

Clark laughed shortly.

"Anything but," he said.

"Now, do you see anything unnatural about this set of alibis and missing alibis?"

Clark glanced at the paper he held.

"No," he said. "They all seemed to be acting normally enough. Miriam Cole is always making candy, and her husband always goes off for a nap after any violent exertion. Seth loves his poker game and his drinks. There are a few radio programs David Long always listens to, if he can manage it. His friends know this. And Freda Long and Janet Moore are sisters. Of course, I see how bad it looks at present for Jim Emerson. And I shall have to make it worse."

Emerson was not the man Clark suspected, if that dread back in his mind had any foundation.

"Yes?" Pierson looked up sharply.

Clark laid the burned scraps of material and the bank books and check stubs of the murdered woman before the doctor.

"I must get this off my chest," he said wretchedly. "And then I'm through."

There was no need to go back into that flaming night a year ago. Whatever was there would be dragged into the naked light of day soon enough.

"Wait a moment," said Pierson, and produced another slip of paper. "Look at this. Are these the programs Mr. Long always listens to?"

Clark glanced at the list. The concerts and humorous sketches set down filled in the time between nine-thirty and a quarter to eleven. Everyone who knew David Long knew that, if at all possible, he tuned in on these programs at this time.

"Why—yes," Clark said.

"Good. Now, this orchestra comes on here at nine-thirty, you see," the doctor pointed with a blunt finger, "over one station. And at ten, these two Dutchmen do their comedy sketch, and sing—but *not on the same station*. Everybody knows that. Do you see?"

Clark saw.

"Why, sure, everybody who likes the radio knows that," he said, puzzled.

"And the Dutchmen's program continues until ten-thirty," resumed Pierson. "You can't get away from that. This radio in the game room is heard distinctly in the kitchen. And Mrs. Cole, O'Toole, and Sen distinctly recall hearing the opera singer Toni Tascagni, singing *Celeste Aida* magnificently, *after the orchestra ceased*. Do you get this at all, Mr. Clark?"

Clark nodded, panic at his heart.

"Yes. You mean the station was not changed after the orchestra concert ceased. That David Long did not tune in on the Dutchmen, his favorites."

"He did not," said Pierson. "These people told me this innocently enough. They didn't know what I was getting at. And Long, everyone tells me—and he admits it himself—loathes opera singers."

"He never listens to them," said Clark, wretchedly. "But he might have dozen off. Good heavens, just because—"

"Oh, certainly! I am merely stating a peculiarity of one of these missing alibis. At around quarter to eleven—or eleven, as well as he can say—when Holloway called him for the game, Long says there was jazz coming in over the air, with that comedian singing. Long is partial to the Dutchmen, and we all know over which station they broadcast at that hour—at ten. Well, by quarter to eleven, or close to eleven, the radio was switched back to the station where it should have been at ten. And what do we get?"

Clark's face was pale with fear.

"David Long has nothing to do with this case," he flared. "He's one of the finest men I know."

"All right," said the doctor, folding up his papers. "I am not saying he is guilty. But one of these people is. Now the story the radio tells me is this. Mr. Long was in the game room at nine-thirty, *but he was not there when the Dutchmen came on at ten.* Otherwise, he would certainly have switched to their station, and not permitted the radio to remain where it was and broadcast a tenor he never listened to. Before eleven, he returned and set the radio right. A little thing, Clark, but people do not always think of the little things."

"But Dave—what does he say he heard last night over the air?"

"That's the point. He says he listened to the Dutchmen. We know he didn't. All these people in the kitchen couldn't be wrong. There is no doubt about the fact that Long did not remain in the game room."

"I know Dave Long had nothing to do with it," said Clark, doggedly.

"You don't know anything," said Pierson. "There is a whole lot seething here under the surface, Clark."

As he spoke, Pierson bent over the things Clark had laid upon the table, and looked up once more into that young man's haggard eyes.


"A funny thing, Clark. On that night a year ago, when the old Lodge burned, this same group was here," he observed. "The place usually has more guests—yet when the only two calamities the place has

ever known happened, this same crowd is here, and *nobody else.* That's significant."

Clark felt his heart sink. He knew that it would not be long now.

CHAPTER TWELVE

FROM THE HALLWAY

 HE dinner gong was ringing through the Lodge, struck by the yellow hand of old Sen, when Clark knocked on Janet Moore's door.

The girl opened it at once and he saw that she had put on a simple little velvet dinner gown and was making a brave effort to act as usual.

"I must see you for a few moments, Janet," he told her. She moved back and he stepped into her room.

"What is it?" she asked, faintly. "Has Pierson found—"

"He will," said Clark. "We are not going to get out of here without a show-down. This man has us all here, and he's going to keep us. There have been developments, and there are some things I must ask you. One thing in particular. I saw you coming out of Jim's room with him this afternoon. You seemed worried about something, both of you. Jim is in a spot, Janet. He has no alibi, and there are several other serious counts against him. I've come in to ask you to tell me what you know—before another night comes."

Janet's lovely face was drained of color.

"I don't know anything of any importance, Walt," she said. "I went to speak to Jim about something not connected with last night's murder at all."

"Perhaps not." Clark's voice was grim. "Possibly it was connected with last year's fire. With something that occurred then?"

"You must be crazy!" Janet said, but her eyes fell before his.

"Janet, Pierson is going to probe into all our secrets," he said desperately. "I've just come from an interview with him. The very setting up here is an open book to him. The snow talks to him. He reads the woods and the trails. I'm worried about Jim. Tell me what you know, Janet. We can't believe Jim a murderer."

"No, no, he isn't!" Janet cried. "He carries a gun because he fears for his own life. He's been afraid for a year."

"Mary Farnworth first made him afraid," said Clark, softly "Isn't that true?"

"Yes."

"Heaven help him if that ever comes out!" said Clark fervently, and put out his hands and laid them on the girl's arms and drew her to him. "Janet, tell me you don't love Jim," he begged. "You must have known for years that I—"

What he was saying was cut short by a crash against the door, as though something heavy had fallen there. There followed the sound of running feet.

As Clark rushed into the hall, he almost fell over the body of the maid, Banning, which lay crumpled against Janet's door. A strong smell of chloroform pervaded the hall, and one of the soft Turkish towels belonging to the Lodge was wound about the girl's face and head.

Janet cried out, and clapped a horrified hand over her mouth, but it seemed as though everyone was there then, with the exception of the servants, Tad Wallace and the chief of police. Miriam Cole and Freda Long, Miriam in a dinner dress of Chinese red, Freda in a rich plum-colored negligée; David Long and Seth Holloway and Cole in dinner coats; Jim Emerson and Eddie Jackson partially dressed, Emerson with shaving lather still on his chin. Doctor Pierson, in leather jacket and high boots, was kneeling beside the unconscious maid.

After a brief moment, in which no one seemed to know what had occurred, Pierson carried the girl into Janet's room and laid her on the bed. His face was grave as he looked about at the strained faces, but his eyes were suddenly bright.

"I'll ask Mr. Clark to assist me with first aid," he said. "The girl was given a strong dose. She's out."

"Will she die?" asked Clark, as he moved to the bedside.

"Not if we can force air into her lungs."

While he assisted Pierson, Clark noticed two things. He saw Eddie Jackson unlock the girl's right hand and remove

something from the clenched fingers, and he saw that Janet did not look at anyone in the tense group, but kept her eyes on the stricken girl. He felt that she did not dare look around her.

Old Sen's dinner gong rang again, this time with a distinctly angry note. He was an excellent chef, and lost his temper when his meals were kept waiting. But it was over a half hour before Banning stirred and attempted to speak weakly.

Turning her head, she pointed toward Miriam Cole with a limp right hand, scarce lifting her lashes, yet getting across to everyone present the venomous hatred that surged within her.

"She did it," she whispered hoarsely. "She chased me. Smothered me! She—"

Shudder after shudder rippled through her slight body. Doctor Pierson accepted Holloway's flask and forced a few drops of whisky between the pallid lips.

"Why, you crazy little fool!" cried Miriam Cole, on a note of hysteria. "Why would I attack you? I've been in my room dressing! I never have anything to say to you, Banning."

And then Clark saw the flashing glance Janet flung her sister, who was leaning in polite solicitude against the foot of the bed, wrapped in the clinging folds of her silken negligée. It was a glance replete with fear, with warning. As he noted it, Clark's own eyes went back to Banning, whose hand still pointed at Miriam Cole's knees, whose heavy eyes had not lifted to Miriam Cole's face, only to the brilliant red of her gown.

It came to Clark, with a shock, that he had seen Freda Long, blond as she was, in lounging pajamas of white and that shade of red! Now her slight body was wrapped in the heavy folds of that plum-colored robe, it was true—but if, when she fell, the maid had glimpsed only a flash of red behind her, and not a face—or if she had seen Freda Long, if Freda it had been, she had meant the words in Janet's bedroom as an accusation—thinking that Freda still wore the red garment!

It would not have taken Freda a moment to dash into her bedroom and change into this loose robe. But why would Freda

attack the maid? And why in such a fashion? A flare of rage seemed to consume him. This blond siren, so clever about her love affairs, might blast her husband's fine, honest life if she wished, but she should not ruin Janet's. Janet could no more make that sister of hers run straight than she could straighten out a pretzel!

"I think she will be all right now," said Pierson, gazing down at Banning, who had fallen into a doze. "I'll stay here. You'd better all go to dinner."

"Why the devil would anyone wish to harm Banning?" cried Seth Holloway, suddenly. "I wish you could manage to clear things up, Doc, so that we could get out of here."

"Banning knows why she was attacked," said Pierson, softly, "and I think I do, too. We'll have her up in a short time now. Then she'll talk. For that reason I'm staying right here—and I've got a gun."

A raucous voice at the door flung panic into the tautly strung room.

"What's going on here?" demanded the chief of police, as he strode over the delicate rug in his high boots.

"You trot on down and get your dinner, Ferd," advised Pierson in a soft voice. "Nobody else is dead—yet."

Eddie Jackson touched Clark's arm and held out his open left hand. Upon it lay a few scraps of paper.

"Got these from her fingers," he said. "Can't you figure what she was after?"

Clark examined the bits of paper. There were marks of typewriting on several; faint, illegible marks.

"Holy smoke!" he gasped. "The book! Mary Farnworth's book!"

"Yes," Jackson said, grimly. "She was after the book and she got it. But she didn't have it long. Well, I'll be handing these over to Pierson, Walt."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"HE KNOWS!"

DINNER was a farce. The attack on Banning had left all the guests of Sky Lodge shocked and astounded. Miriam Cole spoke of nothing but the maid's accusation and her own

innocence, until her husband, ragged with nerves, cried, "Oh, for God's sake, Miriam, stop it! We know you didn't do it!"

"Somebody brought that chloroform here," muttered Holloway, slumping dejectedly in his chair. "Devil of a thing to have up here at Sky Lodge."

"Tad always keeps it in his cabin," offered Jackson curtly. "For his dogs. That time his lead dog broke his leg—"

"Well, I guess nobody knew that but you," said Emerson in an ugly tone, and the eyes of the two men clashed like crossed rapiers.

"Let's keep our heads," said Clark quietly. "No one of us can suspect the other of these dreadful things."

"But we've got to!" said Holloway thickly, a bit out of control. "There is nobody else here, Walt. One of us did it. And we aren't any of us ever together when these things happen. We were all scattered tonight waiting, or dressing, for dinner. There isn't the old comradely spirit among us. And how can there be, when one of us is a murderer?"

"Yes, that's it. We prefer our own society," said David Long.

"We shouldn't, for safety's sake," said Cole, with a mirthless laugh. "No saying when we will all need an alibi."

Clark sat there in the delightful dining room, with its oak-panelled walls, its raftered ceiling, its blazing log fire and its ship's lantern light, and he thought of the gay times they had all had there for so many years.

In Clark's opinion, it had been Banning who had taken that drop across the lake dressed in Mary Farnworth's suit. And if this was true, then she had tried to give one of these men at the dinner table a much needed alibi. Since Dr. Pierson had announced the time of Mary Farnworth's death, the girl had become a menace. Was that it? But chloroform her? As Pierson had said, the hole was still in the ice.

Clark shuddered slightly and turned his eyes to Janet. She was regarding him with a softened expression that sent a warm glow along his nerves. She had not had time to answer the question he had asked

her in her room, but she had not forgotten it. He could see that. He would seize the very first opportunity to continue. And if she cared—

Clark's glance shifted to others about the table. Freda Long was pallid under her rouge, and her jeweled fingers were unsteady as she lifted her coffee cup. Dave was not himself. He laughed at the wrong times, and there was a kind of bright defiance in his manner. Eddie Jackson had little to say, but his eyes were bright on everyone's face. Clark's respect for Jackson's detective ability was rising. Maybe the lad did have a flair for this kind of thing! That had not been bad, taking the snips of paper from the maid's clenched fingers. Seth Holloway was saying nothing and drinking heavily. The Coles were at dagger points because of Banning's accusation and Miriam's constant harping upon it. As for Jim Emerson, he ate little, said nothing and drank black coffee.

Watching him, Clark wondered what Emerson feared. The chief of police was the only affable person present. Not accustomed to such excellent cuisine, he humped himself over the table and ate like a gourmand, talking with his mouth full, laughing boisterously, watching them all, as a cat watches a mouse. No doubt he felt that Doc would soon have things cleared up now.

And that book Mary Farnworth had had ready for the publisher—where was it now? That it had been in the maid's hands for a short time Clark did not doubt.

Suddenly he had a hunch that started gooseflesh down his arms. Well, it was a possibility! And if he could get his hands on the book, he would know what Jim and Janet and Freda Long and the killer would never tell him.

He would wait until everyone had retired. Not one of them would think of this, he felt sure, nor would the guilty person, seated close to him at that dinner table, guess that he would stumble upon the truth.

But first of all he must have this out with David Long. To put through a night thinking that his best friend was involved

in this crime was impossible. He must know something before much more time passed. He must see Dave, and finish that interrupted interview with Janet.

But when David Long went with him to the game room, upon Clark's request for a talk in private, Eddie Jackson joined them at the door.

"I don't want to butt in," he said, his face looking white and strained, "but I wanted to put Dave wise to something Pierson has stumbled on. He knows, Dave, you were not in this room last night during all those radio programs. He's a smarter bird than you realize. I wanted to ask you—"

"Not a damn thing!" Long snapped, giving way to a rare temper. "I shan't tell you one word—you all know more now than I do about my family affairs! I've got nothing to say, Eddie. You'd better forget your detective talents up here just now—if you want to keep your friends."

Jackson shrugged, with a helpless glance at Clark.

"Dave, I was only trying to help you," he said, as he turned back to the hall. "You're the last man I want to see in any trouble. And the sooner we straighten this thing out, the better. We can't go on with our friendships, as someone said at dinner, with this cloud over us. Better operate and be done with it for good and all."

"HE'S right," said Clark, when he and Long were alone. "Why the devil did you lie to this ferret-eyed doctor about your alibi last night? The radio program told him you were not in this room all evening."

"I don't see how," said Long doggedly. "And I'd rather he caught me in a lie than tell him where I went—and why."

"Do you know who killed Mary?" asked Clark.

"No. I didn't see it done."

"Give me the story, Dave. I love Janet, and if she'll have me, I'll be your brother-in-law some day. But even so, I couldn't be closer to you than I've been these last ten years."

David Long's eyes softened as he

watched the tall young figure pacing the Chinese rug.

"Walt," he said, "I didn't do it—don't worry. Do you remember how often I've been jealous of Freda? Sometimes I had no reason, but again—"

"I know," Clark said.

"Tell me, first, how Pierson found out anything from the radio programs," said Long, abruptly. "I tuned in all right."

"But you forgot to change the station, and the people in the kitchen heard that tenor singing *Celeste Aida*," said Clark, miserably. "Where the devil were you, Dave?"

"I was outside trailing a woman I believed was my wife," Long said steadily. "I knew she had some sort of an affair going on, but I hadn't located the man. I couldn't bear to suspect these chaps, Walt. Emerson, Cole, Jackson, Holloway—all close friends. But I know Freda so well— There has been a man now, Walt, for over a year."

Clark nodded briefly. "But you found the woman you were trailing was Mary Farnworth," he said.

"Yes. She looked around in a patch of moonlight and she stepped into a soft deep place in the snow, and I heard her swear." Long passed his hand over his clouded eyes. "If I had only gone on and brought her back, Walt! But I didn't. I was overcome with relief that it was not Freda, and I didn't care where Mary went."

"I was not snooping, or trying to hide, and it was quite by accident that I saw Jim Emerson leave the Lodge by a side door and take a path that crossed that snow-shoe trail around the opposite side of the lake. That's all."

"I came in. I was still upset about Freda, who I knew was up to something, and after I got back to the game room I suppose I never thought of the radio until that tenor's voice annoyed me. Then I switched to my usual station. I'd been in here then for a little while, walking around and smoking. I could see the stairs, you know, from here, and the windows give on the side door. I was thinking of nothing but Freda. Seth called me then, and we started our game."

"Good heavens, then—!" Clark stared at Long in horror.

"Yes. It looks rotten for Jim. Do you suppose I was going to tell that sharp-eyed doc that I was trailing my wife, and that I saw Jim Emerson sneaking out after Mary Farnworth? Not much. I just said I was in here."

"He knows you were not," Clark groaned. "Dave, you remember the night the old Lodge burned—"

"Do you suppose I've thought of anything else?" David Long flung out of his chair and started for the door. "I keep seeing Jim with Freda unconscious in his arms. Walt, there was never anything between Freda and Jim. And I can't suspect him of killing Mary Farnworth, much as she may have deserved it, perhaps. If Eddie Jackson doesn't stop his snooping, he'll stumble on something vital, Walt, and then we'll have a crime here none of us will ever get over!"

Walter Clark stood for a moment alone in the game room. Janet sneaking out of Jim's room, refusing to tell why. Perhaps, if they all kept their mouths shut, they could stave off this doctor, and settle down to a life of agony, as Jackson said, with this spectre of guilt stalking in their midst— No! He could not endure that. He had to go on with the thing now, to its finish. He *had* to know. . . .

THEY had taken Mary Farnworth's body to the smoking room, which lay at the end of a long corridor on the lower floor, and, deciding that he could not wait until the others had retired, after all, Clark turned down this corridor now and opened the smoking room door.

Darkness met him, a darkness sliced through with a thin knife of icy air. A window was partly open. Through it drifted moonlight as chill as the atmosphere of the room. As Clark stood there, pausing with an involuntary shudder, from somewhere in the white desolation outside came an eerie cry, the cry of wolves. Clark had heard the sound often enough, but just then it added to the horror that had descended upon their white playground and it seemed as though it

had suddenly turned upon him, this Northland that he loved, and showed its merciless fangs.

Taking a flashlight from his pocket, he moved toward the body, which lay on a tufted couch, and made short work of ascertaining that what he sought was not there. He had been so sure that this hunch was straight that he felt a distinct jolt. And after that, something else troubled him: the knowledge that he was not alone in the room.

A soft breath in the darkness, a subtle perfume, told him that the person there with him was the girl he loved. Grimly, he made up his mind that now they would have this thing out. This was the second night he had sought for her in darkness—but there would be no more of that between them, ever!

Not caring to flood the room with light, he moved unerringly toward her, and it was not long before he had her close in his arms, a panting, shivering thing of loveliness.

"Janet, you must tell me now," he whispered, tightening his clasp. "Why did you steal into the snow last night—and what are you doing in this room now?"

"I know so little, Walt," she whispered, clinging to him unhappily. "Freda is crazy about some man here—I don't know who. I felt sure she was going out to meet him last night. Once before, I prevented—"

"I know," Clark said, a savage anger racing along his veins. It was time Janet ceased sacrificing herself for that worthless sister!

"Mary Farnworth was blackmailing Freda and the man Freda loved," Janet whispered. "I got that out of her and Jim. Jim rescued Freda the night the old Lodge burned, and Mary saw him. Jim wouldn't tell me in which man's room he found my sister that night, but Mary knew."

"I guessed that," Clark nodded in the darkness.

"Jim will never tell," said Janet, bitterly. "He cares too much for Dave. But he knows his life is in danger. Freda has a lot of money coming to her from an

uncle's estate which is not yet settled. They were waiting for that, I guess. I know that Mary Farnworth held a whip hand over some people. That is how she lived, and Banning, that maid, snooped for her, I guess. I think Banning was looking for Mary's book tonight when she was attacked."

"That book—" began Clark swiftly.

"I came in here to look for it myself," Janet went on. "I knew she wrote one and gave it to Tad Wallace to mail, and that he brought it back here and someone took it. He told me that. This seemed such a likely hiding place, with that doctor looking everywhere else and watching us all so—"

"It isn't here," said Clark shortly. "Jim has got to talk, Janet. He knows. He went out into the snow at the time Mary Farnworth was killed. No mistaken idea of loyalty and decency must keep him silent any longer. I am going to get them all in the living hall and make him talk."

"It was Freda who tried to give that man an alibi," said Janet wearily. "After you left me last night, I went into her room. I knew she was shamming sleep—she cannot ever fool me. And there were wet tracks on her rug. There's no use fighting it, Walt. It will have to come out now, or there will be another—there will be—Jim."

"Before we go any further, Janet," Clark held her closer and spoke against her ear, "tell me you love me and will marry me now, at once. In the face of this frightful thing—publicity, disgrace—I want you to tell me this, Janet. I want to take care of you and protect you."

"Walt!" Janet's voice was low and tender, and she gave him her lips, for the first time. "Oh, Walt, darling!"

Out of this moment of delight in that stark, horrible room, Walter Clark roused sharply.

Someone was approaching the closed door!

DRAWING Janet back into a corner, Clark waited, the flashlight in his hand, as the door was opened noiselessly and closed again, and dragging, careful

steps crossed the room toward the space where the cold fireplace gaped.

Neither Clark nor Janet dared to move, scarcely to breathe, while the unseen third person struck a match. The light flickered out, and the intruder struck another, with a muttered oath, and set it to something in the bare grate. But in the flare of the second match Clark had seen the man's face. He flashed on his light and stepped forward.

"Jim!" he said, sharply. "What the devil are you doing?"

Jim Emerson's hand dropped from the gun he had almost drawn from his pocket, and over his shoulder his staring eyes met Clark's.

"I'm burning this accursed book," he said. "Let it go, Walt. It can't be turned loose. Banning was after it in Freda's room tonight. I knew Freda had knocked her out with that chloroform, and I figured she had the book. Wallace had the story in his cabin, and it was stolen, Janet told me. So I knew that, since Tad Wallace had had chloroform in his cabin for his dogs, Freda had probably taken the book when she took the other stuff. She would have killed to get this book, Janet. I found it tonight while I was looking for my Sky Lodge sweater. She had it hidden cleverly, but I'm a pretty good detective when I'm working to get this crime shifted off my own shoulders. Mary Farnworth deserved killing, Walt, she and her contemptible little accomplice, Banning."

"Your sweater, Jim?" Clark felt dazed as he stood there watching the pile of loose papers burn.

"Yes. Somebody stole mine. The other fellows all have one, I found out, and there isn't any kind of mark on mine to distinguish it. That's my luck. If Freda had kept this book, Walt, that smart doctor would have had it in no time. And there's too much in it. The woman knew too much about the members of this Lodge. She and the book are better out of the way."

Jim's sweater. Of course—fool that he was! The murderer had Jim's sweater at that very moment!

"Jim," he said bluntly, with Janet clinging to him and shivering, "you've got to tell us where you found Freda the night the old Lodge burned. You owe it to yourself. You may permit a killer to escape if you don't. You've got to tell!"

"Nothing doing," Emerson said, smiling mirthlessly. "I've stopped him, dead or alive. Any man who marries Freda Long, after she divorces Dave, will be confessing this crime. I shan't tell a thing like that, nor would you, Walt. They're done, both Freda and the man. They can't move without admitting this murder."

"You're crazy!" cried Clark. "Why, this Banning girl will—"

"She was only trying to get her hands on something real." Emerson shook his head. "Mary Farnworth was too smart to give her straight dope on anything. Now, of course, Banning wants to take her mistress's place and reap the profits."

"Please tell, Jim!" Janet urged. "I begged you to today. We can't go on, not knowing."

"Where did you go at the time Mary Farnworth was killed?" asked Clark, earnestly. "Tell us that, Jim."

"I went out to keep an eye on her, but she gave me the slip," said Emerson, ruefully. "I'd seen her skating that appointment into the ice in the morning, but I kept still about it. I didn't know where the meeting was to be, and I wasn't sure which man she meant it for, since she was always up to something. She ran smack into me the night of the fire as I was bringing Freda from that chap's room. I'll never forget the jolt it gave me when I heard her moaning in there as I passed the door!"

"You didn't go on the skiing party," said Janet. "Can't you see what a bad spot you are in if you don't speak? And now you've burned the book!"

"I didn't go because I was too upset," said Emerson, grimly. "Freda had just told me Mary Farnworth had been blackmailing her. She said she was urging this man to let her divorce Dave and openly admit their love. But I think he wanted to be sure of the money Freda is coming into, first. And perhaps he had his own

ties. There are three of them, you know—Seth, Eddie Jackson, and Herb Cole. Any cur who left her to burn in his room because he figured it was safer to rescue himself or another lady just then—”

“Forget this loyalty to Dave, Jim,” Clark pleaded. “The man involved with Freda must be one of these three—yes, if it isn’t you. But any of you, Dave included, might have killed Mary Farnworth. I think I know the man she loves. I remembered the arrangement of the room in the old Lodge today. But Janet cannot be happy unless you clear this up. And it isn’t fair to Dave—”

The dying fire lighted Emerson’s face in grim determined lines, but before he could speak, a shot rang through that chill dark room and Jim Emerson pitched forward along the hearth.

As Clark dashed to his side, he heard Pierson’s clear, clipped voice in the hall.

“It’s all right, Ferd—I’ve got him!”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“I LOST MY HEAD”



OUTSIDE the living hall windows, fine snow drifted across a faint moon. Inside, a silent group of people sat close to the huge roaring log fire, as though the chill of the winter world had crept into the Lodge.

They were all present. Jim Emerson, with a bandage on his wounded shoulder, lying, white-lipped and nervous, on a couch. The maid, Banning, still shaken from her experience earlier in the evening, crouched on a low stool near old Sen and O’Toole. Tad Wallace, fresh from the white outdoors, and wearing shoe pacs and woolen parka, leaning against the wall.

Miriam Cole and Freda Long sat near each other on luxurious cushions before the blaze; it lent color to their pallid faces. Janet and Walter Clark occupied a small divan drawn close to the chief of police, who slouched in a chair, his long, lank legs stretched before him, a pipe in his mouth. The case was finished, and very glad he was, too.

Doctor Pierson stood with his hand on

the back of the chair where Eddie Jackson sat smoking a cigarette. His keen, narrowed eyes rarely left Jackson’s face.

“Make it snappy,” he advised.

“There’s nothing to it,” said Eddie Jackson dully, his gaze upon the tense slight figure of Freda Long. She did not look at him, but stared into the fire, her eyes live jewels in a dead face. “Freda and I have been in love for a couple of years. Mary Farnworth found out. The night the Lodge burned she saw Jim bring Freda out of my room, and from then on she blackmailed us—both of us. I got desperate, for she was demanding more all the time. She wanted three thousand last night, and I didn’t have it. I have a small income, but it doesn’t meet my needs, and the office hasn’t paid anything yet. I told her I would see her alone last night, and she wrote on the ice with her skates *at ten*, and when she passed me later on, she whispered, ‘The end of the slide.’”

“I knew what an isolated place that was, and I made up my mind to rid myself of Mary Farnworth forever. We knew she had written a book slandering various members of the Lodge, and Freda kept such a close eye on her that she got it from Tad’s cabin before he started to town with it, and left blank sheets in its place. We could never have let that book get away from us. She would have made everybody pay to stop its publication.

“Well, I was a fool, I suppose, to tell Freda what I was going to do, but I didn’t dream she would try to give us that alibi. I had put the toboggan back, and I figured they wouldn’t find Mary. I was a fool again to try to plant the crime on Jim Emerson and silence him that way. I guess I lost my head. I should have gone the whole hog while I was about it, and wiped him out, too. There might have been peace, then, for Freda and me.”

“You burned your sweater on that snow-shoe trail and stole Jim’s,” Clark said, staring at Jackson as though he had never seen him before, sick with shock. Why, Eddie had been helping with this investigation! And cleverly, too!

“My sweater was torn so badly I was

afraid to bring it back," said Jackson, wearily. "I wish now that I had left it with Jim and taken his. Jim kept putting himself in wrong, and for a little while I banked on him to keep quiet, but tonight I couldn't risk it—and I felt sure I wasn't watched."

"You can't be sure of that, with men who are used to stalking big game up here," grinned the doctor.

"No and as Walt told me, I am a hell of a detective," Jackson muttered.

David Long was pacing up and down the floor. Everyone avoided looking at him. Now he spoke.

"It was my wife, then, whom Walt and Janet saw on the toboggan slide?"

"It was," said Pierson, sympathetically. "You had the right hunch when you tried to trail her, but you didn't stick long enough."

As he spoke, he put out a hard-knuckled hand and laid it on the maid's shrinking shoulder.

"So you were after the book tonight, sister!" he said. "Wanted to go on with the game!"

"I wanted to see who had it," said the girl, sullenly. "I had looked in all the rooms and was searching Mrs. Long's when I heard a sound. I didn't know she was in the bathroom I started to run, and that chloroformed towel was clamped over my face."

"So you meant to accuse Mrs. Long and not me!" said Miriam Cole, triumphantly.

"I did accuse her," said the maid. "I pointed right at her as soon as I could

speak. She had on something bright red. That was all I saw."

"I used the chloroform I took from Gad's cabin especially for you," said Freda Long, lifting a face like chilled marble and fixing venomous eyes on the girl. "I had to drag you down the hall, and I dropped you when I couldn't manage any longer. I ran back and took off my pajamas and got into my lounging robe, for I wasn't sure you had really seen my face. It wouldn't have been easy for you to say you had been in my room searching for that book. You should have been under the ice, with Mary Farnworth."

Seth Holloway, ashen-faced and shaking, pushed a glass into Cole's hand. Cole was chewing an unlighted cigar.

"Have another," Holloway invited. "Isn't this the darndest finish?"

"The darndest," Cole agreed, and took the bracer eagerly.

Walter Clark put out a restraining hand as Janet started toward the tense, angry figure of her sister.

"Not now, darling," he said gently. "Come out into the moonlight, into the fresh air. Perhaps now you can answer the question I asked you before."

As they started toward the door, Janet looked up, and slipped her hand into the crook of his arm.

"You know the answer, don't you, Walt?" she said.

Walt smiled down into her eyes.

"I think so," he said, and felt Janet's fingers tighten on his arm. "If I'm right—"

"Of course you are!" Janet said, softly.

(The End)

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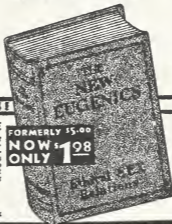
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If you reside in Canada, send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada

**DOCTORS SAY
"DO THIS FOR
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Doctors recommend for the relief and prevention of Piles active exercise, a light, non-stimulating diet, a mild "salts" laxative.

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Take half a teaspoonful of Mint-flavored Harvin Salts in a glass of water before breakfast. Eat according to the Harvin Plan you find in the package. Then know blessed relief from terrible, torturing Piles.

Mint-flavored Harvin Salts are pleasant to take. Unlike other "salts" they do not make you nauseous, do not grip, do not leave unpleasant after-effects. They work smoothly, naturally. Ask your druggist for Mint-flavored Harvin Salts today and get SAFE Pile relief. Also sent on receipt of 65c. Harvin Products, 66 W. 45 St., New York.

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They gave me the "ha-ha" when I offered to play ... but I was the life of the party after that



THE first day of Dorothy's house party at the shore had been a huge success. After swimming, boating and golfing all were ready for the wonderful dinner that followed.

"Well, folks," said Bill as we left the table, "I'm all set for a good dance."

"Fine," cried Dorothy. "Dick can make the banjo hum. Who'll play the piano?"

All looked at one another foolishly.

"Jim, you play, don't you?" asked Dot.

"Yes I'll play 'Far, Far Away,'" laughed Jim.

"Well, then, Mabel, will you help us out?"

"Honestly, Dot, I hate to admit it, but I can't play a note," she answered.

It certainly looked as if the party were going flat.

Then I Offered to Play

"If you folks can stand it," I offered shyly, "I'll play for you."

The crowd instantly burst out into laughter.

"You may be able to play that play football, Jack, but you can't tackle a piano."

"I've never heard you play a note and I've known you all your life," cut in another.

As I strode to the piano I chuckled to myself; I had a surprise in store for them.

No one knew what to expect. They thought I was about to make a fool of myself.

Then—I struck the first snappy chords of that foot-tapping fox-trot, "St. Louis Blues." Dick, dumfounded, almost dropped his banjo. But to a flash he had picked up the rhythm and was strum-

ming away like mad.

The crowd was all dancing in a jiffy. Fox-trots and waltzes—while guests few and far between.

After a good round of dancing I decided to give them some real music and began a beautiful Indiana love lyric.

The couples were now seated quietly about the room, entranced by that plaintive melody.

No sooner had the last soft notes died away than I was surrounded by my astonished friends.

"How wonderful, Jack! Why haven't you played for us before?"

"How long have you been studying?"

"Why have you kept it so secret all these years when you might have been playing for us?"

"Who gave you lessons? He must be wonderful!"

I Reveal My Secret

Then I explained how I had made up my mind to go in for something besides sports, play—to entertain others—also to be popular. But when I thought of the great expense and long study and practice required, I hesitated.

Then one day I ran across an announcement in a magazine telling of a new, quick and simple way to learn music at home, without a teacher.

I was a little skeptical at first, but I sent for the free booklet and free demonstration lesson.

The moment I saw it I was convinced and sent for the complete course.

When the lessons arrived I started right in, giving a few minutes of my spare time each day. And what fun it was. No monotonous scales—no tedious exercises—no tricky methods—just a simple, common-sense system that even a child could understand. And

I was playing my favorite numbers almost from the start.

Anyone can learn to play this easy, no-teacher way—right at home. The piano, if desired, or any other instrument that you may choose. Over 600,000 people have learned to play by this simple system, in less than half the time it takes by the old-fashioned methods. And the cost averages only a few cents a day.

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To prove how practical this course is, the U. S. School of Music has arranged a typical demonstration lesson and explanatory booklet which you may have free. So if you really want to learn to play—if you want hosts of friends—to be popular—write for this free booklet and free demonstration lesson.

Don't delay, set at once—fill in and mail the attached coupon today—no obligation whatever. U. S. School of Music, 4445 Brunswick Bldg., New York City.

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Please send me your free book "How You Can Master Music in Your Own Home," with inspiring message by Dr. Frank Crane. Free Demonstration Lesson and particulars of your easy payment plan. I am interested in the following course:

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Cello	Trampoline
Guitar	Coronet
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DO YOU want money? — a small fortune? — \$2,500.00 in real Cash? Here's your opportunity! And not one cent of your money is required now or ever to win it. This is our sensational new way to advertise. We want people everywhere talking about our company quick. So we are giving away thousands of Dollars — real fortunes — 100 cash prizes totaling over \$5,000.00 — besides thousands of dollars in Extra cash rewards. *Everybody* can share in these cash rewards. Wouldn't you, too, like to win a brand new Buick Sedan and \$1,000.00 (or \$2,500.00 all cash)?

Can YOU Find 4 Dogs in Picture at Right?

Some are upside down. Some sidwise. Can you find 4 dogs? Mark the dogs you find, clip picture and mail quick. *Hundreds* of people have won thousands of dollars in cash rewards in other advertising campaigns conducted by men in this big company. Above are a few. Now comes your chance. Maybe this great opportunity sounds like a dream to you, but I'll be happy to send you the \$2,500 or Buick and \$1,000.00 the minute you win it.

Not a Penny of Your Money Needed

All these prizes are being given *outright* to winners. Not a penny of your money needed to buy anything. *Not* a lottery. No luck or skill needed. Nothing to write. Imagine the joy of receiving a letter from me with \$2,500.00 in it! Oh, boy, what a thrill! Hurry — get started quick by finding 4 dogs. *Nothing* for you to lose.

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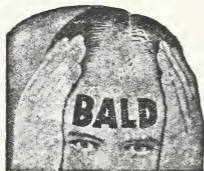
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Just mark the dogs you find, clip picture and mail quick with coupon below — or write on a penny post-card how many dogs you find. Don't send a cent. For replying I will tell you how you may share in thousands of dollars in EXTRA cash rewards and win \$2,500.00, too. Answer today.

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29x3.50-18	2.55	2.80	3.05	3.30	3.55
29x3.50-16	2.55	2.80	3.05	3.30	3.55
29x3.50-14	2.55	2.80	3.05	3.30	3.55
29x3.50-12	2.55	2.80	3.05	3.30	3.55
29x3.50-10	2.55	2.80	3.05	3.30	3.55
29x3.50-8	2.55	2.80	3.05	3.30	3.55
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